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LITTLE MAC, THE BOY ENGINEER.

By RALPH ROYAL.



"You young skunk," hissed the man, catching Snooksy around the throat, "so it's you who's been squealing, eh! Well, I'll wager you'll never squeal again." He tightened his grasp on the boy's neck until the latter's face became purple, and his eyes bulged out from their sockets.

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LITTLE MAC, THE BOY ENGINEER.

By RALPH ROYAL,

Author of "Jim, the Workhouse Boy," "Dare-Devil Dick," "Fearless Fred," etc., etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE WAIF OF THE TRACK.

"By heavens, Bill, there's a woman on the track."

It was Jack Thompson, the fireman of the "Little Mac," a well-known locomotive on the Morris and Essex Railroad of New Jersey, who uttered the exclamation.

Bill Norton, the engineer, instantly reversed the lever, and gave the danger signal, but it was too late.

The iron monster passed over the prostrate form, there was a subdued groan, and all was over.

As soon as the train was stopped the engineer and fireman leaped off the cab into the snow, and hurried to the spot where lay the remains of the unfortunate woman.

It was a wild, dark night in the month of February, of the year 1857, and the place the open stretch of country lying between Hoboken and Bergen.

It had been snowing for several hours, and the ground was covered as with a white mantle to the depth of several inches.

"By jinks," exclaimed Jack, bending over the dead body so that the rays of the lantern, which he carried in his hand, could illuminate the still, cold features, happily undisfigured. "What a pity, and such a pretty gal, too, and so young-looking. She must have been trying to walk to the city and been overcome by the storm."

"Might be," muttered Bill, thoughtfully, "and then again it mightn't. What could bring such a girl as that out in a night like this? There's something in the way she was lying on the track, an' bein' so quiet-like, never trying to get out of the way, like as if—"

"Yer don't mean for to say, Bill," exclaimed the fireman, as the engineer hesitated, "that she chucked herself on purpose across the track?"

"It looks that way, Jack, and—hello, what's that?"

The sound which had caused the excitement was the wail of an infant.

"I'd swear it's a kid," cried Jack.

"So it is," said Bill, picking up a male child from where it lay beneath the snow.

The tiny thing, scarcely more than a month old, checked its tears when pressed to the warm, manly bosom of the engineer; and looking at him with great big staring eyes, commenced to crow and laugh.

"Do you know, Jack, I see how it is. That unfortunate woman, for some reason or other, wanted to take her life and that of her child. It was sinful to do so, and maybe that's the reason Heaven suffered her to be killed; but the pretty babe is unhurt, and I'm going to take him home to Mary."

By this time a number of passengers, alarmed at the stoppage of the train in the open country, issued from the cars to learn the cause.

They now gathered round the fireman and engineer, and overwhelmed them with questions about the sad occurrence.

With their aid the body of the dead girl was carried into one of the cars and reverently covered with a shawl.

Bill, for the present, resigned the care of the "waif of the track" to one of the lady passengers, and returned with Jack to his post of duty.

When the train arrived at Hoboken, and the occurrence was reported to the superintendent, the police took charge of the corpse, and would also have taken charge of the infant but for a number of claimants that protested against it.

First of these was Bill Norton, the engineer, who, undoubtedly, had the most right to it, having found the child.

Then Jack Thompson liked to add it to his already rather large family; the lady who had taken care of the infant, and who was a wealthy childless widow, earnestly desired to adopt it; several other passengers also declared their willingness to receive the little stranger, and, finally, the police put in their claim.

"I'll tell yer what," exclaimed Jack, as the matter was being discussed in the waiting-room of the depot; "put the youngster on the table there as the stake, an' we'll all draw lots. Whoever draws the prize shall have him."

Bill began to protest against this arrangement, but he was overborne by the ejaculations of the others, who all declared to let the possession of the child rest with fate.

The babe was accordingly placed on the table, and kept his eyes fixed constantly on the man who went around with the paper ballots in a hat, as if it knew and understood what was going on.

Shout after shout of laughter went up from the throng as each aspirant in turn drew forth a slip, and with a lugubrious countenance announced that it was a blank.

The choice was finally narrowed down between the engineer and the police. The laughter now gave way to serious interest. It was now the question whether the child should be reared as the adopted son of a man whose kind and tender heart and generous soul were known to all, or whether it should be consigned to all the horrors, real and imagined, of a pauper's life in the almshouse.

A death-like silence prevailed as Bill tremblingly drew forth the slip of paper.

"Hurrah!" ejaculated he, as he opened it. "I've drawn the prize, and the child is mine."

He caught the wondering infant in his arms, and amid the congratulations and plaudits of the spectators, rushed excitedly out of the depot toward his home, which was a short distance off.

Bill Norton was a fine young fellow of twenty-five or twenty-six years old, a thorough engineer and one of the most genial men alive. Three years ago he had married pretty Mary Hopkins, a girl in every way worthy of him, and, though as yet no children had blessed their union, there wasn't a happier couple than they in all the world.

In spite of the snow storm which still raged furiously, Mary was at the door awaiting her husband's coming, and was much surprised at the mysterious manner in which he kept something huddled up under his great-coat.

"What is it, Bill?" asked she, as she followed him into the kitchen, where a bright fire sparkled briskly on the hearth and a table was neatly spread for supper.

"I've brought you a present, Mary," said he, with a roguish twinkle in his eye.

"A present?" ejaculated she.

"Yes, guess what it is."

"You know I'm poor at guessing," exclaimed she, almost dying with curiosity. "Do tell me what it is."

"Well, it is this," said he, taking the babe from under his coat and bouncing it up and down.

"A child, a real little angel," enthusiastically exclaimed his wife, taking the waif from his arms and almost smothering it with kisses. "Oh, where did you get it from?"

He related to her what had occurred on his homeward trip.

"Poor woman," sympathetically exclaimed she, "what could have induced her to choose such a horrible death? Can't I view the body?"

"Yes, there will very likely be an inquest held over it to-morrow, and you may be present."

"But I'm so glad," continued she, "that you drew the prize. How terrible it would have been to have the dear thing grow up a pauper. We'll adopt him, won't we, and bring him up as our own?"

"We will, that is, if no one claims him, which I hope will be the case. Do you know, Mary, I've already thought of a name for him."

"You have? What is it?"

"I'm going to name him after my favorite engine."

"Little Mac?"

"Exactly; and now let's have some supper, for I'm as hungry as a wolf."

* * * * *

The next day Mary, accompanied by her husband and the child, went to view the body of the dead girl.

It was lying in the morgue on a marble slab. The attendants had washed and dressed the corpse, and thus concealed from view the mutilations of the body, where it had been struck by the wheels of the engine.

Calmly and peacefully lay the girl whom, Heaven knows, what wrongs had driven to death.

A smile was on the still cold lips, as if she had found that peace which on earth was denied to her.

With tears in her eyes and quivering lips, Mary stooped down over the inanimate form and pressed a kiss on the passive features.

Then turning to an attendant, she huskily asked:

"Was there nothing found on her by which she could be identified?"

"Nothing, ma'am," replied he, respectfully, "but a good ring, and that the coroner took when he was here this morning."

"Have arrangements been made for holding the inquest?" asked Bill.

"Yes, sir. It's going to be held at twelve o'clock to-day."

As it was near that time, they decided to await it.

Promptly at noon the coroner appeared and a jury was impaneled.

The inquest was very short, consisting only of the testimony of Bill and Jack Thompson, who had been summoned, and made his appearance at the proper time.

The jury, in doubt as to the fact of suicide,

brought in a verdict of accidental death, acquitting the railroad of all blame in the affair.

After the inquest was over, Mary approached the coroner and begged him to give her the ring as a means by which the child might, perhaps, in the future identify his relations.

The coroner at once handed her the article.

It was a wedding ring, a plain band of gold, on the inner surface of which were engraved the words:

"From James to Effie."

Mary carefully placed the ring in her pocket, and subsequently returned home.

The next day the newspapers contained an account of the affair, and advertisements were also inserted, but when, after the lapse of several days, no one appeared either to claim the dead mother or the living child, the coroner ordered the corpse to be buried in a pauper's grave.

But Mary would not suffer this, and though their means were little, yet, at her request, Bill had the body interred in the churchyard, and over the mound placed a simple tombstone, bearing the simple word "EFFIE."

CHAPTER II.

SNOOKSY.

We pass over sixteen years of time, and now introduce Mac as a fine, healthy, hearty-looking lad, the very picture of his mother, as Mary Norton affirmed over and over again.

He grew up as the son of his foster parents until he reached the age of fourteen.

Then Mary led him to his mother's grave, gave him his mother's wedding-ring, and exhorted him to visit the grass-covered mound daily, and never to forget her who gave him birth.

The revelation was a very painful one to him, for he dearly loved those whom he had looked upon as his parents, and more especially was he devoted to little Effie, the only child of these worthy people, born two years after the happening of the events depicted in our first chapter, and who had been named after his mother.

"Then Effie is no longer my sister," asked he, while his lip quivered, and tears stole silently down his cheeks.

"Not in fact," replied Mary gently; "but she will ever be a sister to you."

After that he became rather grave and restrained, and, though in the highest class in the public schools, flatly refused to go to college when Bill broached the subject to him.

"I have no right," said he, "to be a burden to you, and I am old enough to support myself. Now that Jack Thompson is laid up with a sore leg, why can't I go with you on your engine and tend to the fires? You could, at the same time, teach me all about the locomotive, so that some day I can become an engineer."

"So you want to become an engineer?" asked Bill, while a bright smile overspread his ruddy countenance.

"It is the wish of my heart," replied the boy.

"Give me your hand on that," exclaimed Bill.

"I always thought there was the making of a good engineer in you; but Mary always wanted you to go to college and get book-learning. Now that the old engine's been condemned, and I'm to start with a new one to-morrow, you shall go along with me, and I won't hear a word to the contrary from anybody."

He looked rather fiercely at his wife, as if he expected some opposition from that quarter.

"If Mac wants to be an engineer, of course I don't object," said she, "and only hope he'll have as good luck as you've had. But what's the name of the new engine, Bill?"

"The 'Little Mac,' of course," replied he. "I wouldn't drive an engine by another name."

"Hurrah!" cried Effie, clapping her hands with delight. "Little Mac will be the engineer of the 'Little Mac.' Won't that be splendid?"

Thus it was that our hero, thus early in life, assumed an avocation hazardous at all times, and which was to be especially exciting and adventurous to him.

Bill was very painstaking and conscientious with his apprentice, as he called him, and kept him tending to the fires and oiling the engine for a good many months, in spite of the boy's secret desire to handle the lever, and Mary's remonstrances and Effie's ejaculations, when the lad would come home, utterly tired out and exhausted by his arduous labors, and covered with grime and soot.

Jack Thompson, after his recovery, had been placed on another engine, and Mac now faithfully performed all the service previously attended to by the former, and received the same pay from the company, all of which he gave to his foster-mother to aid in the support of the family.

He had been two years on the engine, and was thoroughly conversant with every part of the me-

chanic before Bill allowed him to make his first trip.

That was a day of triumph for him, and when after a run, which was the quickest on record, the train drew up at the station in Hoboken, he, with beating heart and flushed cheek, hastened to inform his foster-mother and Effie of his success.

He received their congratulations, and then started back to where the engine was standing with steam up, ready to make the return trip.

He had not, however, proceeded far up the street when he was stopped by the most eccentric specimen of humanity he had ever beheld in his life.

It was a boy, who, though in fact several years younger than he, had the appearance of a man prematurely old. He was diminutive in stature, bare-foot, clad in a pair of tattered breeches, wore a rather dirty white vest, a blue army-coat ornamented with big brass buttons and much too large for him, a slouch hat perched at an angle on his frowzy head, and through the many holes of which protruded his sandy-hued hair; his face was pale and haggard, but his small gray eyes twinkled and sparkled like twin stars.

"Be you the feller what runs with 'Little Mac?'" piped this curious bundle of rags and bones, for there was but little flesh on him.

"I am," replied Mac; "and who are you?"

"I'm Snooksy."

"That's a funny name."

"Can't help it. It's the best I've got. But I wants ter tell you somethin'."

He lowered his voice and looked about rather anxiously, as though he feared to be overheard.

"Well, what is it? You must tell me quickly, for I haven't got much time to spare. The train'll be off in five minutes."

"Dat engine's got ter be stopped," hurriedly whispered Snooksy.

"Why?"

"'Cause Velveteen George an' his gang's goin' ter wreck it out on the curve. I heard 'em talk all about. They didn't mind me 'cause they thought I'd stand in with 'em, like I've done all along. But I won't," continued he excitedly, his voice pitched at a shrill whistle, his eyes sparkling with rage and his fingers nervously clutching and unclutching. "I won't, not after they've starved and beat me. See here!"

The boy bared his bosom and showed that it was all black and blue from blows, and striped with livid scars made by a cruel lash.

This was indeed startling intelligence. Mac had heard of trains being wrecked by means of obstructions placed across the track, and that there were a gang of desperadoes hidden in the pine forests in the upper portion of New Jersey that made this their business.

"Come," said he, grasping his strange companion by the hand; "there's not a moment to lose. The train must be stopped."

But when they arrived at the depot it was only to learn that the train had left a couple of minutes before. Bill evidently thinking that Mac would remain at home, had started off without him, taking another fireman along with him. What was to be done?

Night was coming on, together with heavy clouds that would shut out all light from the moon and stars.

The place where the fearful crime was to be committed was in the midst of a deep forest, and before the train would reach a station which could be telegraphed to.

Besides Mac was so excited that he never thought of informing the superintendent of the danger, but seeing a locomotive standing on a side track, ready to be attached to a train, he jumped into the cab, followed by Snooksy, and turning on a full head of steam was off like the wind, to the great astonishment of the people around the depot.

On and on thundered the locomotive.

Snooksy, at Mac's direction, kept piling coal into the red-hot furnace.

The pressure of the steam, as indicated by the guage, rose higher and higher.

The safety-valve shrieked forth the signal of danger, but the intrepid boys paid no heed to it.

Faster and faster revolved the wheels; the huge monster groaned and quivered like a human being in agony; they were speeding along the rails at the rate of sixty miles an hour.

"If she only doesn't blow up," muttered Mac, as he opened the lever still wider and increased the rate by five miles.

Now they were nearing the forest, and peering out of the cab, Mac beheld the train about a hundred yards ahead of him.

He blew a shrill signal.

They evidently heard and understood it, for it was answered by the whistle for "down breaks!"

But it was too late.

Before the train could be brought to a halt, the locomotive ran against a number of bags chained

to the tracks, and amid the shouts and cries of the affrighted passengers the train bounded off the track, and lay on the ground a mass of ruin.

CHAPTER III.

THE MANIAC.

"My God! we're too late," gasped Mac, as he beheld the direful catastrophe.

For a moment he felt inclined to faint dead away, but recovering himself, he once more grasped the lever, and reducing the headway slowly, steamed up to spot.

Bringing the locomotive to a standstill, he and Snooksy sprang from the cab, and hastened to see what damage had been done.

The latter was, indeed, fearful lest the gang whom he had left should be around, and discovering him, kill him; but for this there was no cause, as the desperadoes were frightened away by the signal Mac had given.

Two of the cars were still standing on the track, the coupling between them and the rest of the train having fortunately broken; the other two cars and the locomotive were lying on their sides.

Mac's first care was for Bill, whom he found lying on the ground beside his engine, and groaning with pain.

"Are you much hurt, father?" asked he, addressing him by the title he always used, even after Mrs. Norton's revelation.

"Mac, you here?" groaned the wounded man. "Thank Heaven you were not on the train. I fear my legs are broken."

With the assistance of several of the passengers who were unhurt, Mac raised him from the ground, and carried him into one of the cars.

It was found that none of the passengers had been killed, and though mostly all who had been in the overturned cars were bruised and wounded, yet it seemed that Bill was about the most seriously hurt.

By the aid of several stout ropes, our hero fastened the cars remaining on the track to the cow-catcher of his locomotive, and was looking about for Snooksy, preparatory to returning to Hoboken, when by the light of the moon, which had suddenly broke through a rift in the clouds, he beheld him struggling in the arms of a thick-set, burly man, clad in a coat of velveteen.

Instantly the thought crossed his mind that this man was the leader of the train-wreckers spoken of by Snooksy, and that he had mingled among the passengers to learn who had been the cause of the partial defeat of his infamous plans.

"You young skunk," hissed the man, catching Snooksy around the throat, "so it's you who's been squealing, eh! Well, I'll wager you'll never squeal again."

He tightened his grasp on the boy's neck until the latter's face became purple, and his eyes bulged out from their sockets.

It was his evident intention to choke him to death, and he would probably have done so had not Mac suddenly sprang toward the ruffian and given him a blow full in the face that caused him to let go his hold on the boy and stagger backwards.

Snooksy, recovering his breath, immediately dashed away, too frightened to remain to assist his preserver, and the man, with a fearful oath, turned to avenge himself on his assailant, when he caught sight of Mac's countenance.

He halted abruptly, and glancing sharply at the boy, asked:

"Who are you?"

"No matter who I am," retorted he, "I know you. You are Velveteen George, and you shan't escape from here."

He was about to raise a cry for help, when the man with an oath silenced him.

"Be still, you fool," said he, "and look at that picture."

He drew a miniature out of his pocket as he spoke, and handed it to him.

Mac was much surprised to find what appeared to be a counterfeit presentment of himself clad in a woman's garb.

"Is that my sister?" asked he, almost involuntarily.

"Keep the picture," hurriedly replied the man, "and ask those with whom you live."

So saying, he quickly vanished, leaving our hero holding the portrait in his hand, and more than ever mystified.

He had, however, no time now to think over the matter, and, putting the miniature into his pocket, got into the locomotive, where he found Snooksy awaiting him, and started the train for the depot.

Meanwhile Velveteen George strode through the forest to his place of rendezvous.

"Ah, ah!" muttered he, as he walked along. "At last the hour that I've been so long awaiting

has come. Now, my haughty Estelle, I'll show you what it is to cast me out, just because I spent a little of that money, which is not yours by right. I never believed that that girl had drowned herself, and carried that picture with me everywhere to find some trace of her. To-night I've struck the trail. If there's anything in looks, that boy is her son, and when I once get him in my power I can make my own terms with you, my proud and haughty Estelle."

He chuckled softly to himself, and continued his way in a state of high glee.

Mary received her wounded husband with many ejaculations of grief and alarm, but was greatly comforted by the reassuring words of the physician, who had been hastily summoned, and who promised to bring her husband around all right in the course of a month at the furthest.

The wrecked cars and locomotive were removed to the repair shops and the obstructions taken off the tracks.

The trains now ran regularly again, and when, after a week's time, the "Little Mac" was again placed on the track, she was given in charge of our hero in acknowledgement of his bravery and daring at the time of the catastrophe.

Snooksy had been given a home by Mrs. Norton and put in some of Mac's old clothes.

He now acted as fireman under Mac, and between the two boys a bond of friendship was cemented that was never afterwards broken.

The excitement of the first few days caused the incident of the picture to entirely escape Mac's mind; but he remembered it subsequently, and having shown it to his foster mother, was, to his great surprise, assured that it was the picture of his mother.

He related to her how he had come into possession of it; but from the knowledge which she possessed, she could not determine what interest Velveteen George had in the matter.

His disreputable character, however, impressed Mrs. Norton very unfavorably, and she advised Mac to shun the man if ever he came across him again.

The responsibility of his new position soon caused him to think no more of the circumstance for the time being, and he devoted his whole attention to the management of his engine, winning the plaudits both of the officials of the road and the passengers, who were loud in their praises of the boy engineer.

An incident, however, soon afterwards occurred, which, though he did not know it at the time, had a great deal to do with the mystery which overhung his birth.

He had just left the station of a small village, situated but a short distance from the Hackensack River, when he felt a tap on his shoulder, and looking around was surprised to see an old man plainly, though respectably dressed, standing before him.

The silvery gray hair and beard of the stranger gave him such a venerable appearance that Mac hesitated to tell him that it was against the rule for any passenger to ride in the cab of the engine.

"Excuse me," said the old man, politely. "I'm a friend of the superintendent, and with his permission I've come here to ask you a few questions about your engine, as I am interested in all such matters."

These words entirely disarmed any suspicion that might have arisen in the boy's mind.

"I will answer," said he, deferentially, "to the best of my ability."

"Don't you think," said the man, after a slight pause, "that this engine travels at a very slow rate?"

"No," replied Mac. "It's the fastest engine on the road."

"Indeed!" exclaimed the other. "Then why don't they stop running by steam and employ the new power?"

"What new power?" asked the boy.

"Electricity."

"I've heard of that, sir; but it cannot be practically accomplished."

"But I say it can," replied the old man, a little eagerly. "I've done it myself."

Mac looked at him curiously.

"Some old fogey of a scientist," thought he. "I've been troubled with their theories."

"Yes," continued the other, "I've had an engine constructed expressly for the purpose, chained Heaven's lightning to the wheels, and, hurrah! we were off at the rate of a thousand miles an hour."

At these words the truth flashed across our hero's mind.

This man was a lunatic, who must have escaped from the asylum in the vicinity of the last station and come into the cab.

The thought caused him some uneasiness, for he was comparatively alone with him, as Snooksy was busy shoveling coal into the furnace.

He determined to humor him until his companion had finished his work.

"That was pretty quick," said he, with a forced smile.

"Not so quick as we could go with my new engine," continued the lunatic, warming up with his subject. "I haven't constructed it yet, but I've got the idea. You see, the friction of the wheels retards the speed. Now, in my air line, I'm going to have the train suspended in mid-air by means of two mighty opposing magnets, and then with my lightning power I'll travel around the earth in twenty minutes. I ain't quite clear on the subject, for whenever I think of it there's a face that looms up before me and mocks and ridicules me."

"A face," murmured Mac, unconsciously.

"Yes," shrieked the maniac, suddenly becoming furious, "yours!"

In spite of the terror which overcame our hero as he recognized his perilous position, the thought uppermost in his mind was that this was the second time that his face had affected persons entire strangers to him.

He gave a quick cry of alarm and placed his hand on the lever to shut off the steam, but the maniac was too quick for him, and seizing him by the neck, pulled him away.

"Yes!" shrieked the lunatic, "it is your face that prevents the accomplishment of my great work, and you needn't think that I did not recognize it because you've disguised yourself in boy's clothes. You've eluded me thus far, but I've got you now. You shall die now, and not mock me any longer."

In vain the boy screamed, and kicked and struggled.

The maniac seemed to be endowed with superhuman strength, and lifting him bodily from the ground, held him out of the cab, ready to drop him at any moment to the ground below.

And all this while with no one to guard the lever, the train was rushing at a headlong speed toward a bridge, where the red flag proclaimed that the draw was open.

CHAPTER IV.

JIMMY THE TWISTER.

In the densest portion of the almost impenetrable pine forests that abound in the northern part of New Jersey, stood a hut that had formerly belonged to a family of charcoal-burners, but which had been deserted by them when the broken roof no longer kept out the rain, the paneless windows afforded no shelter against the wind, and the entire structure, rotten and worm-eaten, seemed likely to topple on their heads.

It was in this deserted and tumble-down condition when Velveteen George and his gang discovered it, and determined to make it their headquarters.

For this purpose they artfully contrived to render the interior of the hut safe and habitable, while at the same time leaving the exterior as dilapidated-looking as ever.

A subterranean chamber was also dug, having several different outlets. This was used to store away their plunder previous to its being secretly conveyed to New York and sold to "fences," and also to serve as a refuge and mode of escape in case they were attacked.

When Velveteen George entered the hut on the night of his meeting with little Mac, he found several of his men sitting round a table drinking whisky and playing cards with a lad of about the same age as Snooksy, but better dressed.

The boy held a number of cards in one hand, a cigar in the other, while on the table beside him stood a glass half filled with fiery liquor.

His countenance bore a rakish devil-may-care expression, sad to behold in one so young, and, as he raised it at the entrance of Velveteen George, the likeness between it and that of the latter stamped them at once as father and son.

"Hello, dad!" he sang out. "Got a buster, didn't yer? Oh, I know all about it. The gang's come back all down in the mouth like a pack of whipped curs. Served 'em right, an' you, too. Why the dickens didn't yer let me manage the job? I'll bet I'd a fixed 'em."

"It'd turned out all right, if that little varmint of a Snooksy hadn't betrayed us."

"So it was Snooksy, eh?" said the young hopeful, putting his cigar between his lips and drawing forth a murderous-looking bowie-knife. "Just let me catch hold of the young squealer. I'll skin his hide for him."

"Well, Jimmy," continued his father, "p'raps if I didn't haul in any swag to-night, I've found out something that's better, both for you and me."

"Yer don't say so, dad? What is it?"

"Come to my room, an' I'll tell yer all about it."

The boy rose with alacrity.

"Is it a long story, dad, or a short one?"

"Well, pretty long."

"Then I guess I'll take the bottle and a couple of glasses along with me. Yer know I get dry orfully quick."

He unceremoniously took the black bottle from his companions, and having first drained his glass with all the ease of an old toper, took that and another one, and followed his father into a side room, which was Velveteen George's private apartment, and shared only by his son, whom he loved with that wild, unreasoning devotion often met with in persons of the most depraved character.

"Well, dad," exclaimed Jimmy, when they were alone, "let's have a stiff horn first, and then sling out yer yarn."

He filled the glasses and handed one of them to his paternal relative.

"I'm afraid, Jimmy," said his father, "that you drink more whisky than is good for you."

"Oh, git out," replied the boy. "Didn't yer teach me how ter drink and smoke almost before I could speak? I'm a tough nut, dad, I am, and the only time whisky don't agree with me is when I mix it with water."

His father said no more, and the two having emptied their glasses, Velveteen George accepted a cigar and light from his son, and began:

"Yer don't remember yer mother, Jimmy, do yer?"

"Not much. Never knew I had any."

"Well, yer have, an' she's a fine lady, lives in a brown-stone house in New York, dresses in silks and diamonds, has her horses and carriages, goes to church on Sunday, and, you bet, is highfalutin' all over."

"Yer don't mean for to say, dad, that that ere woman's yer wife?"

"It's a fact, Jimmy."

"And my mother?"

"Exactly."

"Look here, dad, I want none of your foolin' now. Tell me this. Why ain't you gettin' your stake out of all them fine things, and why ain't I sportin' it on Broadway with a piccadilly collar an' a white neck-tie, a cane in one hand an' a twenty-five cent cigar in the other, eh? Why am I out here in the woods instead of cutting a shine on the avenue. Why am I drinking tangle-foot whisky instead of champagne? That's what I want to know."

He cocked his hat on one side of his head, elevated the cigar in his mouth at an angle of forty-five degrees, and, leaning back in his chair, placed his feet on the table.

This attitude struck his father as so comical that he burst out laughing, and, tapping him on the shoulder, exclaimed:

"Jimmy, you were born to be a sport, an' I'm going ter put yer into a posish ter cut just the kind of the shine yer talkin' about."

"How yer goin' ter do it, dad?"

"Why, make yer mother acknowledge yer."

"And fork over the stamps?"

"Exactly."

"What's the reason you've got ter force her ter do it?"

"Well, yer see, when she married me she was a widow—her husband, in fact, had killed himself. He left a writing, though, telling her as how he'd married another girl, and that she weren't his wife, but the other girl was. Do you understand me?"

"Like a book. Go on."

"He left lots of property, an' all that, which of course went ter yer mother, perviden the other girl wouldn't turn up. There was a picture of the gal found on the breast of the man, an' yer mother gave me the picture an' told me to investigate the matter."

"But how'd yer come ter know my mother?"

"Oh, I was secretly married to her afore she married this rich man."

"Then all the time she wasn't his wife at all, either?"

"No; that's just the fun of the thing. I was lugged right after marryin' her, and sent to State's Prison for ten years. I managed to escape after a year, though, and came back to find what I've just told you."

"There, dad," interrupted Jimmy at this point, "yer better wet yer whistle fore yer go on wid yer yarn. It makes me dry just ter listen ter yer."

Father and son once more drained their glasses, and then the elder continued:

"All I could find out about the gal was that she'd run away from home, and as the river ran near where she lived it was generally believed that she drowned herself. Leastways that's what I reported to yer mother, and she, mighty glad that she had all the money now, took care of me, who was her rightful husband, yer know, and gave me a share of the swag. Well, things went on pretty well till after you were born, when she

got high-toned and was converted and all that. She didn't like the idea of having an escaped convict for a husband, and perhaps I did gamble away some of the money and come home drunk once in a while. Finally we had a regular blow up and she threatened to betray me to the police if I didn't clear out. That settled the matter, and of course, I had ter git; but I took you along with me, Jimmy. I wouldn't have left my kid behind for all the money in the world."

The convict's voice trembled somewhat as he uttered these last words, and he cast a wistful, yearning look on his son as if he would clasp him to his bosom.

He controlled his emotion, however, and continued:

not come to the rescue of the boy engineer before the maniac was holding the latter out of the cab.

It was at this juncture that Snooksy, with up-lifted shovel, struck the lunatic a blow across the head, causing him to stagger back and let go his hold on Mac.

The boy engineer did not fall to the ground.

Even while being held by the insane man he had contrived to twist his feet around some part of the engine, and when he was let go he remained perched on the locomotive.

Crawling forward he reached the cow-catcher, and then for the first time noticed that the draw of the bridge over the Hackensack, which they were about to cross, had been opened to afford

"You kin bet I did," panted the other, an' he jist knocked the wind outer me. I seed what he was up to, an' cracked him 'cross the head with the shovel. That kinder settled him for a minit, but then he gits up and at me, catches me round the throat an' tries ter chuck me inter the red-hot furnace, which he could ha' done, seein' as how I left the door open. Yer kin bet it was a struggle for life an' death, an' I thort sure my goose was cooked when he spied the river, an' no sooner did he see that, when he let's go of me an' jumps overboard. He must have had the hydrophoby or somefin' like that. But I say, Mac, how the dickens did you manage ter keep alive an' stop the train? I thort you were runned over when I let yer go."



He made a lunge at Mac's breast; but the boy, deftly evading the thrust, sprang to the other side of the raft, and snatching up the pole, brandished it in the air, and exclaimed, "Back! back, old man, or I'll brain you!"

"Yer know, Jimmy, since yer were old enough to know anything, how I've been traveling round from place to place, and finally joined the gang here. Do yer know why I did so? It was because I never believed that gal was drowned, and that sooner or later I'd hear something of her."

"And yer did to-night?" asked the boy.

"To-night," exclaimed he, excitedly, "I put my eyes on her son."

Jimmy sprang to his feet with a bound.

"And that son," cried he, "is the true heir of all the money his daddy left. How much is it?"

"Nearly a million, Jimmy."

"Say, dad, I kin see what yer driving at. If we git that boy in our power we can force this high-toned mother of mine to acknowledge you and me, and, what's of more consequence, pony over one-half of the money."

"You're a chip of the old block, Jimmy," admiringly replied his father. "You've hit the nail on the head exactly. We must put up a job on this youngster and rope him in. How'll we do it?"

"Oh, leave that to me, I'll fix it," replied the young hopeful. "Tain't for nothing they call me Jimmy the Twister."

CHAPTER V.

THE ENCOUNTER ON THE RIVER.

It will be remembered that Snooksy was in the cab of the "Little Mac," but being engaged in the important duty of filling the furnace, could

passage to a schooner, and had not yet been closed.

How should he save the train? How prevent the destruction of property and the lives of the passengers, which now seemed imminent?

This was the thought which possessed his mind to the exclusion of every other idea.

The bridge was not above a hundred yards distant, and whatever was to be done must be done quickly.

He conceived a bold, a daring idea.

Hastily stripping himself of his jacket and vest he crawled under the engine and rammed them into the cylinder of the piston, which caused the wheels to rotate.

There was a crunching sound, then the cylinder became clogged, the piston ceased to act, the wheels failed to revolve, and the train came to a standstill at the very edge of the bridge.

At the same instant, with a wild eldritch shriek, the maniac sprang from the cab into the river, and disappeared beneath the surface of the water above which he was not seen to rise again.

Mac now got into the cab, and his first care was to shut off the steam, and prevent an explosion, which might have resulted from his manipulations with the engine.

Then he turned to look for Snooksy, and found him lying on the floor in an almost exhausted state.

"Hello, Snooksy," exclaimed he, cheerily, aiding his companion to get on his feet, "did you have a wrestle with the lunatic?"

Mac explained in a few words, and received the admiring commendations of his friend, which encomiums were renewed by the passengers, who now began to crowd around to learn the cause of the stoppage, and to whom he was obliged to repeat the story.

The jacket and vest were taken out of the cylinder in a totally demolished condition, a circumstance, however, which afforded the passengers an excuse for making up, and presenting a purse to the brave lad. The draw was properly arranged, and once more the train started on its way, Mac leaving the bridge officials to find out what became of the maniac.

No further incident marred the trip or the run home to Hoboken, and that evening Mac had the pleasure of recounting the adventure to his foster-parents and Effie.

"That's mighty strange, Mary," said Bill, from his sick bed. "I wonder who that lunatic could be?"

"You say," asked his wife, turning to Mac, "that he made special reference to your face?"

"Yes," replied he, "and that's what struck me most. It's the second time, you know, and he couldn't very well have belonged to Velvetten George's gang."

"It's a part of the mystery surrounding your birth," thoughtfully continued Mary, "a mystery which I fear will never be lifted. And you think the old man is drowned?"

"I'm sure of it."

But here Mac was mistaken.

The maniac was not drowned.

He came up above the surface of the river under the bridge, and it was owing to this circumstance that he was not seen by those looking for him.

Almost mechanically he swam to the bank, and reached the mouth of a culvert which drained the surrounding marshes, and empties itself into the Hackensack at this point. He crawled through the opening and lay for a time utterly exhausted at the bottom of the conduit.

Fortunately there was but little or no water in the culvert, and, though the place was filthy and ill-smelling, he was in no danger of being either suffocated or drowned.

Meanwhile, the bridge officials, finding no trace of him, believed that he had sunk to the bottom, and desisted from further efforts, leaving it to the proper authorities to dredge the river, or wait until the corpse should rise to the surface, as they might see fit to do.

It was dark night when the maniac awoke from his sleep of exhaustion; but he neither regarded that fact, nor the position in which he found himself.

With a cunning often met with in persons of unsound mind, he crept along the culvert, until his hands touched a sort of shelf formed of bricks against one side of the conduit, and intended as a resting-place to those who occasionally entered it for the purpose of cleansing it.

He stretched himself at full length on this shelf, and began to ruminate aloud:

"Ha, ha!" chuckled he; "I gave them the slip this time; no more black dungeons, no more strait jackets for me. Here, at last, I am free. I am king here, with the rats for my subjects. Ho, ho! Hear how they sing. Yes—yes, my bonny dears, I'll remain with you; they shall never take me back to the asylum again. I'll work, too; I'll perfect my great invention; I'll show them that I am not mad; and if *her* face mocks me again, I'll crush it—I'll crush it, though it appear in a hundred disguises."

In this rambling way did the poor lunatic commune with himself until once more his eyes closed in slumber; and amid the rats and vermin, the darkness and filth, the cold and damp, he slept as peacefully as a child in its downy crib.

The keepers of the lunatic asylum visited Bill Norton's cottage the next day.

They reported that the old man had escaped the day previous, that his name was Silas Raymond, and that though they did not know the precise cause of his madness, they believed that he must have been some eccentric inventor, whose mind had become unsettled over his scheme.

He had been in the asylum for many years, and that though at first quite violent, he had recently become so quiet that he had not been watched as carefully as he might have been.

They were surprised to hear of his murderous attack on Mac, as they had supposed him entirely harmless, and could not account for this sudden outburst of his old fury.

Accompanied by Mac they visited the Hackensack, and after, as they thought, a complete search, departed as wise as they had come.

Nothing was heard of the maniac for some days, and then rumors came that he had been seen during the night on a large raft paddling himself quite rapidly across the river.

These rumors were at first discredited, because the raft in question, which was used to aid in repairing the bridge, was always found during the day in its proper place, chained to one of the piers of the bridge; but when articles of clothing and food began to disappear from the canal-boats moored at this point in the river, and several bowie-knives and other weapons had been mysteriously stolen when left carelessly on the deck of any boat over night, things began to assume a different shape, and a party was formed to go out in a row-boat and remain on the river over night.

Mac, hearing of this, obtained permission from his foster parents to go with Snooksy to the village from which the party was to start, and join them in their search.

He was the more enabled to do this from the fact that it was an off night for him and his chum, and they relieved from duties.

It was not merely the love of the dangerous and exciting which induced the boy engineer to share the perils of this night expedition, but a peculiar fascination, for which he could not account, which drew him towards the maniac ever since the latter had referred to his countenance.

There were altogether six persons in the boat, and they rested on their oars when they arrived in the center of the stream near the railroad bridge.

It was about nine o'clock, and as there was no moon, the darkness was relieved only by the faint light of the stars.

This was an advantage to them, as it rendered them less likely to be perceived by the maniac if

he should appear, while they, on the other hand, would infallibly hear the commotion in the water caused by the moving of the unwieldy raft.

For over an hour they waited thus, merely backing water to prevent themselves from being drifted along with the tide.

At the end of that time a rippling sound caught their ear, and a minute later the shadowy outline of the raft and its solitary passenger could be traced in the darkness before them.

The moment they beheld it they experienced a danger which they had not provided for.

The tide was running very strongly and the darkness of the night had prevented them from seeing the bulky raft until it was quite close to them. A collision seemed inevitable.

"Hold on, there," cried one of the men. "You are running us down."

But a mad burst of laughter was their only response.

"Back water for your lives," ordered the self-constituted leader of the party.

But the command came too late; the bulky raft struck the fragile and heavily-weighted row-boat full in the side and capsized her, throwing the men into the river.

And above the shock of the collision, the shrieks of the struggling men and their cries for help sounded the wild, eldritch, blood-curdling laugh of the maniac.

CHAPTER VI.

ENTRAPPED.

THE cries for help attracted the notice of various persons on board the canal-boats, and these at once set out in row-boats to the scene of the catastrophe.

While they are engaged in hauling the drowning men out of the water, let us turn our attention to Little Mac.

As soon as he saw that the collision was inevitable he sprang up from his seat and dived into the river at the moment it was capsized.

Being a powerful swimmer, and as much at home in the watery element as on dry land, he came up to the surface clear of the upturned boat, and directly beside the raft.

Actuated by a sudden impulse, he climbed up on this and stood face to face with the maniac.

We have before remarked that there was no moon. That luminary, however, now rose above the horizon and shed its beams full on the forms of the two occupants of the raft.

The maniac presented a truly terrifying appearance. He was barefooted, wore a pair of tattered sailor's breeches and a blue navy shirt, which articles of clothing he had evidently stolen; his head was uncovered, his face pale and haggard, while his long gray hair and beard were tangled and matted. In his hand he held a long, heavy pole, which he used to steer the raft; but the moment that the light of the newly-risen moon enabled him to clearly see the features of the boy, he dropped the pole on the raft, and drawing from his waist a long and glittering bowie-knife, he exclaimed:

"That face again. I must crush it; yes, I must crush it."

He made a lunge at Mac's breast; but the boy, deftly evading the thrust, sprang to the other side of the raft and snatching up the pole brandished it in the air, and exclaimed:

"Back! back, old man, or I'll brain you!"

The maniac saw the determined glitter in the boy's eyes, and a change came over his demeanor.

Suddenly throwing his knife into the river, he burst into a flood of tears, and falling on the boy's neck, in sobbing tones and with infinite pathos, cried:

"Effie! oh, Effie!"

Mac started and trembled so violently that the pole dropped from his hands and slipped into the stream.

Effie! it was the name engraved on the mound beneath which rested the remains of his mother.

Who was this maniac? What relation was he to her, to him?

He was about to put the question, when the tender mood, either real or feigned, passed away from the lunatic, and he once more broke out in wild fury.

"At last I have you!" shrieked he, suddenly twining his long bony fingers around the boy's throat. "You cannot escape from me now. Ah! ah! that sweet, cruel face shall haunt me no longer. At last I will crush it—I will crush it."

Mac felt his breath come quick and short, he gasped and choked, he grew purple in the face, his eyes seemed to start from their sockets, and his head appeared to be on the point of bursting.

With all the strength he was still master of, he twined his arms and legs around the maniac, and tried to shake him off.

But in vain. The lunatic clung to him like grim

death, and a terrible struggle for life and death ensued on the raft.

A sudden lurch of the latter threw both of them into the river, and there the combat was continued.

It would undoubtedly have ended fatally for Mac, had not at this juncture several of the canal-men, who had by this time rescued the capsized party, plunged into the water and come to his aid.

More dead than alive he was dragged from the maniac's grip and into one of the boats.

The old man was subsequently secured, and, firmly bound hand and foot, placed in the bottom of a boat.

The object of the expedition was now accomplished, and though attended with the danger we have described, fortunately without any loss of life.

Mac and Snooksy obtained dry clothes and lodging for the night in one of the canal-boats, and when they returned home the next day it was a great relief to Mary and Bill to learn that the maniac, who had conceived such a strange hatred to their adopted son, was at last safely incarcerated in the asylum from which he had made his escape.

It was true that one enemy was, for the time being, at least, rendered powerless to harm the boy-engineer; but he had other and more bitter foes, who were even then plotting against his life and liberty.

Velveteen George and Jimmy had not been idle. The latter especially, disguised as a street gamin, had paid frequent visits to the railroad depot, and picked up various bits of information about Little Mac which would be of service to him in the plot he was weaving to get the boy-engineer in the power of the railroad wreckers.

One day he boldly accosted him with the words:

"Say, Mac, give's a chaw of terbaccer."

"I never chew," replied he.

"Oh," sneered Jimmy, "you're one of them pious sort. I'm sorry fur yer, for I heerd a good deal 'bout you an' wanted ter take yer ter New York ter show yer the sights. But of course yer wouldn't go to ther Bowery Theater, oh no, yer mother'd know yer out, an' it ain't like Sunday-school. So I can't take yer, though I've got plenty of 'sugar,' an we cud cut a swell shine. I'm sorry for yer, Mac, as I said before, yer a nice-looking boy an' it's a pity yer so pious-like."

Taking out a roll of greenbacks from his pocket, he flaunted them before the eyes of the bewildered boy, and then replacing them in his pocket slowly sauntered away.

Now Mac was but human after all. His vanity had been excited by the urchin's carefully chosen words, and he did not relish the fling at his moral rectitude. No boy does, however virtuous he may be. Besides, he had often heard speak of the "Old Drury," and his imagination had been further stimulated by the gaudily colored posters affixed to the walls of the depot. He had nothing to do that night, and his foster-mother had requested him to go to New York on some errand. Why couldn't he accept the generous offer of this unknown admirer of his?

He called the boy back.

"Who are you?" asked he.

"Billy Button," glibly replied the lad.

Had he given his right name, Mac would have instantly recognized him, for Snooksy had told him of the young autocrat of the railroad gang.

"I'll go with you to the 'Bowery,' if you'll assure me that you've come honestly by your money."

"Of course I did," asseverated Jim. "Ain't I got a dad who's as rich as blazes; an' don't he give me all the rocks I want? Of course he does, an' why shouldn't he, seein' as I'm his only son and heir?"

"Well, then, where'll I meet you? I've got to go to New York on an errand, and when I get through with that we can go to the theater."

"Do you know where the corner of Bowery and Canal street is?"

"Yes."

"Meet me there at half-past seven."

"I will; but, Billy, I've got a friend called Snooksy; can I bring him along?"

"Of course yer can," replied he, after a slight pause; adding in an undertone, "I'll fix both of 'em at once."

They parted company shortly after this, and though the young schemer had not forbidden his intended victim to mention their proposed entertainment, yet Mac of his own accord never mentioned a word of it.

He felt rather doubtful whether they would allow him to go, and boyish-like he determined to risk a scolding upon his return.

It was the first time that he had been disobedient to his foster-parents, and there would be soon cause for him bitterly to repent it.

He and Snooksy were off duty at five o'clock

that afternoon, and having dressed themselves in their Sunday clothes they bade Bill and Mary good-bye and started for New York.

On the way Mac told his companion of the new friend he had made that afternoon and the treat that was in store for them, rousing Snooksy's curiosity and desire to see the entertainment to the highest pitch.

Their errand was properly performed, and promptly at the appointed hour they found themselves at the place of rendezvous.

Jimmy was there before them, and though Mac with great formality introduced him to Snooksy, the latter did not recognize him.

There was no wonder in this, as Snooksy had only seen the Twister in the ragged dirty costume he wore in the woods, while now he was dressed up like a young sport, and clothes make a great difference in the appearance of boys of his class.

"I'm glad ter see yer, boys," exclaimed Jimmy, somewhat disguising his voice. "Had yer grub?"

"Yes," replied Mac.

"Then come right across the street. That's the theater there, where the big lights are shining. They're playin' two bully pieces to-night: 'Nick of the Woods' an' 'Jack Sheppard.' Did yer ever see 'em afore?"

Both Snooksy and Mac were obliged to admit they never had had that pleasure.

"Never seen 'em?" continued the Twister. "Golly, then yer'll have a reg'lar feast. Whalley's doin' the 'Nick of the Woods,' and yer'll hear spoutin' that'll raise the hair off yer head. Fanny Herring's goin' ter play 'Jack Sheppard,' an' she's just A No. 1."

By this time they had arrived in front of the theater, and Jimmy procuring reserved seats in the orchestra chairs the party passed in.

It is unnecessary to state that Mac and Snooksy enjoyed themselves hugely.

Everything was new and strange to them, and the time passed so rapidly that Mac uttered an ejaculation of dismay, when on leaving the theater at the conclusion of the performance he heard the bells strike the hour of midnight.

"Twelve o'clock!" cried he, "and the last boat leaves at that hour. How'll we get home now? I didn't think the theater would last so long, or I wouldn't have come."

"I'm afraid we'll have ter make a night of it," said Snooksy, but little less dismayed than his companion.

"I'm sorry for it!" exclaimed Jimmy, in tones of feigned sympathy; "but yer know what can't be cured must be endured. I've got plenty of stamps left, and I move we get an oyster stew and then go to a hotel for the night."

"What will father and mother think?" muttered Mac. "I've never stayed out over night before."

He began to be heartily sorry that he had come.

But there was nothing to do but submit to the inevitable, and with a sigh he followed Jimmy's lead, until they reached a basement at the head of which was a colored lantern.

After a slight hesitation Mac and Snooksy followed their guide down the steep steps and into the saloon.

It was a long, narrow, low-ceilinged, dingy-looking place, with a bar at one end and several tables ranged along the side.

A number of men were standing at the bar, and as soon as Snooksy caught sight of one of them he turned as pale as death.

"Velveteen George!" gasped he.

"Here they are, dad," sang out Jimmy in his natural tone. "I've steered them here all hunkey."

"The Twister!" cried Snooksy, now recognizing his companion of the evening. "Fly, Mac, fly for your life, we are betrayed!"

The boy-engineer was quick to perceive the danger and turned on his heels to ascend the steps.

But before either he or Snooksy could escape, the gang pounced upon them and kept pounding them so unmercifully that they sank stunned, bleeding and helpless to the floor of the dive.

CHAPTER VII.

THE DEMON AND THE IMP.

IN one of the most palatial residences on Fifth Avenue, in the city of New York, resided Mrs. Estelle Mowbray.

On the evening of the day succeeding that on which occurred the incidents related in our last chapter, her spacious and elegantly-decorated parlors were thrown open for a masquerade party, given by the lady to her fashionable friends, in honor of her birthday.

The gorgeously-furnished apartments were thronged with merry masquers, whirling in the mazy waltz to the music of the band hired for the

occasion, while serenely in their midst, clad in a robe of purple, her person radiant with the flash of many diamonds, proud in her well-preserved beauty, majestic in form and bearing, strode the hostess.

It was a very select affair, and, though the masquers were unknown to each other, yet they had all privately revealed themselves to the lady, while congratulating her, so that she might know that there were no intruders present.

She was, therefore, somewhat puzzled by the appearance among the crowd of a demon, clad in the orthodox red costume, with horns, tail and club-feet, and a little imp, who bounded about as though made of India-rubber.

Who could they be? They had not unmasked themselves to her, and, becoming uneasy, she determined to discover their identity.

Calling a servant, she bade him tell them that the lady wished to see them in the conservatory, and proceeded thither herself, fortunately finding a place temporarily deserted.

She had not long to wait before the demon and the imp appeared.

The former made a profound bow before her, while the latter, by way of showing his courtesy, stood on his head.

"Gentlemen," said she, in a somewhat haughty tone, "I have asked you to meet me here in order to obtain the pleasure of an introduction to you, which, I believe, I have not yet had. In plain words, may I know who you are?"

"With the greatest of pleasure," replied the demon, raising his masque, "though I should think that the choice of my costume would have led you to surmise my identity."

"Velveteen George!" gasped Estelle, as soon as she caught sight of his face.

"Your husband," added he, with a leer.

"And your son Jimmy!" cried the imp, regaining his normal position and likewise raising his masque. "Don't yer know me, mammy, yer own lovely Jimmy, what is now known as the Twister. Oh, let me give you a twist."

The audacious boy actually tried to hug his mother, but she pushed him rudely from her, and turning to Velveteen George, in a voice almost choking with rage, demanded:

"How dare you come here, sir, and bring that brat with you?"

"I dare do many things," replied he, in a tone of quiet but deep signification. "Jimmy was dying to have a look at the woman who gave him birth, and seeing in this morning's paper the announcement that the wealthy and fashionable Mrs. Mowbray was going to give a masquerade party this evening, it struck me as being just the opportunity for which I waited, for you know, Estelle, that I must be very careful about showing myself undisguised in public."

"And knowing that, you dare to come here," cried she, angrily, "after I had sworn an oath to hand you over to the police if you pestered me any more."

"Oaths are made but to be broken," replied he, dryly.

"They are!" exclaimed she, exasperatedly; "you shall see."

On a rustic table near them stood a silver bell. She struck this.

"Now," said she, "the servant who answers that summons will be dispatched for the police."

"I'll bet half a dollar," exclaimed Jimmy, "that he'll be sent for some whisky and cigars. I'm awful dry an' just dyin' for a smoke. Say, mammy, yer don't chew terbaccer, do yer! Cause, if yer does, I'd like ter ask yer for a chaw."

"Estelle," whispered Velveteen George, bending over towards her, "I have found her."

At these words all the color faded from the proud lady's face; she reeled and would have fallen had not the burglar supported her.

At this moment the servant appeared.

"Now," triumphantly whispered the convict in her ear, "order the police."

"John," said she, faintly, "a glass of water, if you please."

"An' whisky an' cigars for two," ordered Jimmy, with a chuckle.

The servant looked inquiringly at his mistress, and receiving a confirmatory nod from her, left the conservatory and soon returned bearing the required articles.

After he was dismissed, and they were again alone, Velveteen George politely handed the glass of water to Estelle, who, drinking it and feeling somewhat recovered, eagerly demanded:

"Well, you have found her—where is she? does she know all?"

"Calm yourself," said he, "and let us seat ourselves at the table here. We can talk confidentially, and it will seem to any one who might happen to come into the conservatory as if you

were merely entertaining a couple of intimate friends, which indeed we are, very intimate."

They seated themselves as he directed, and then Jimmy, raising his glass of liquor, exclaimed:

"Mammy, here's to your very good health, an' the hope that we'll freeze together more in the future than we have in the past."

He drained the glass, and George having followed his example, they lit their cigars and commenced to smoke.

"I know you don't object to smoking," said the convict. "Many a time in the good old days, I've made cigarettes for you. Ah, happy hours, will they ever come again?"

"Oh, tell me about her!" impatiently exclaimed Estelle. "You are keeping me from my guests. They will wonder at my absence."

"Well, Estelle, you need experience no fear from Effie, for she is dead."

"And you have come here to tell me that," angrily cried she. "I have suspected it all the while, and your confirmation only puts you into my power. I will get rid of you now."

Again she rang the bell.

"I guess," said Velveteen George, with a quiet smile, "you'll have to order two more whiskies, and at the same time you might order a plate of ice-cream for yourself. It will look so much the more natural. Yes, Effie Mowbray is dead, but her son lives."

"Two whiskies, two cigars, one ice-cream and a chaw of terbaccer," sang out Jimmy to the servant, as he appeared in answer to the summons.

With the exception of the last-mentioned article the servant executed the order, and having again taken his leave, Estelle eagerly asked:

"You are sure of that?"

"Pretty sure," replied the convict, "seeing that I've got the youngster safely locked up in my present headquarters, in the forests of New Jersey," and he briefly related what is already known to the reader.

"You must put him to death," hissed she.

"And kill the goose that is to lay me golden eggs? Not by a long shot."

"But at least you will prevent him from ever claiming his rights."

"That depends on circumstances. You see, Estelle, I hold the trump card now, and if you agree to my terms I'll remove the lad thousands of miles away, where he'll continue to remain in ignorance of his parentage. If you do not, all New York shall learn by to-morrow who the fashionable Mrs. Mowbray really is, and to whom this palatial residence, the stocks and bonds, the income of which you draw, the splendid equipages, those very diamonds that glitter on your bosom, really belong."

"What are your terms?" asked she, thoroughly humbled.

"Well," said he slowly, "first and foremost, that you receive Jimmy into your house. I don't want to have the boy become what I am, and you, his mother, should give him that position in life to which he is entitled."

"Yes, mammy," put in Jimmy with a swagger, "I wants ter become a sport; that's what I was cut out for. Fast horses, you bet; champagne, that's my huckleberry, and pretty gals, of course. Jimmy, won't I cut a shine?"

"Secondly," continued Velveteen George, not heeding the interruption, "I'll trouble you for one thousand dollars down, and the same amount sent to, say Chicago, every month."

"Would you make me a beggar?" muttered she.

"Beggar, pshaw! your income is fifty thousand a year, if it's a cent. But you will become a beggar if you refuse my offer."

"But," demanded she, "how do I know but that you're deceiving me now? What proof have I, except your word, that there is such a boy in existence, and that he is in your power? Prove that, and I will accept your terms."

"I will do so," replied he after a slight pause. "I will bring the boy to you to-morrow night at this hour."

"It is well," said she, arising. "At that time I will have the money for you. Until then I will acknowledge neither you nor that brat."

"Oh, mammy," cried Jimmy, in tones of mock injury, "is it thus yer speak of yer lovely kid? Won't yer give me a kiss ter remember yer by? Only one for yer own sweet boy."

But the lady abruptly terminated the interview by passing through the tall windows which afforded a passage from the conservatory into the parlor.

To the questionings of her friends she gave an indifferent explanation of her absence, and as soon as she could safely do so retired to her own room.

"What I have so long dreaded," muttered she, pacing up and down the apartment, "is about to come to pass. But I will foil him yet. If to-morrow night he brings her son into this room, the boy will never again leave this place alive."

She unlocked a secret recess of her desk, and drawing therefrom a bottle containing a colorless liquid, examined it in the gaslight with a self-complacent air.

"This will accomplish the purpose," muttered she, replacing the bottle in its hiding-place, locking the recess and concealing the key about her person.

Then she once more descended to her guests in the parlor, and entertained them with all her accustomed grace and dignity.

The demon and the imp, however, were nowhere visible.

They had taken the precaution to leave the house before the hour to unmask had arrived.

Entering the carriage which had brought them hither, they drove to a costumer's, and there resuming their ordinary costumes, they turned their steps towards the ferry and were soon once again in New Jersey.

It did not take them very long to reach the vicinity of the hut, to which on the previous night they had brought Mac and Snooksy after overpowering them in the Bowery dive, but even before they arrived at the rendezvous they noticed the lurid glare of a conflagration.

The truth at once flashed into their minds. The hut was on fire.

CHAPTER VIII.

A DESPERATE ESCAPE.

As has been already intimated, Velveten George and Jimmy, after knocking Mac and Snooksy senseless, had conveyed them to the lone hut in the forests of New Jersey.

This was accomplished by carrying the unconscious lads through a back exit from the dive into Elizabeth street, where a butcher's wagon, belonging to the gang, was drawn up.

They were placed in the bottom of this wagon and their bodies covered with straw so as to be concealed from view, and then the convict and his son taking seats by the driver, the vehicle was driven at a rapid pace to the foot of a pier at the North River, where a rowboat was awaiting them, all the various parts of this kidnapping scheme having been carefully pre-arranged.

The boy engineer and his friend were taken from the wagon and placed in the bottom of the boat, and Velveten George and Jimmy having also entered it, the crew, consisting of a half-dozen roughs, swiftly rowed the boat across the river.

Arrived at the Jersey shore another wagon was found awaiting them, and the boat having been concealed in a little cove known only to the party, the gang started off at a rattling gait for their place of rendezvous, bearing with them the still senseless forms of Mac and Snooksy.

Morning was breaking when the hut was reached, and the two boys were soon conveyed to the garret of the shanty.

Throwing them on a pile of mildewed and rotten straw, they were left there to recover consciousness as best they could, while Velveten George and Jimmy turned in to get a few hours' rest before their projected visit to Estelle Mowbrow.

All day long the brave boys were locked in death-like stupor, and it was only when the twilight was merging into darkness that Mac opened his eyes.

He felt sore and weak, there was a buzzing sound in his head, and for some moments he could not realize where he was.

Gradually, however, the fantastic visions that seemed to be dancing around him began to assume shape and he recognized that he was lying on the floor of a garret, surrounded by odd scraps of broken furniture and other rubbish.

Slowly he raised himself up to a sitting posture, and then perceived what seemed to be the dead body of Snooksy stretched by his side.

With a great cry he threw himself on him and kissed the passive lips.

The contact seemed to infuse life in the waif's form, for he moved slightly, his eyelids trembled for a moment, and then opened, and he faintly murmured:

"Mac."

"Thank Heaven, exclaimed the boy engineer, 'you live!'"

"Where are we?" feebly asked Snooksy, struggling to his feet.

"I do not know," replied Mac, also arising. "In some garret."

Snooksy glanced around him, and a gleam of intelligence lighted up his eyes.

"I know this place," whispered he; "they've kept me here before; but I managed to get out. And we can get out again."

The boys remained quiet for a few moments until they had regained sufficient strength, and then Mac examined the doors and window. He found them locked and bolted from the outside, and the latter heavily barred.

"We're in a cage," exclaimed he, despondingly, "and I don't see how we can escape."

"Yes, yes we can!" eagerly replied Snooksy. "Let us wait until midnight. Then the gang will be asleep, and we'll feel stronger. We'll get out of this crib, you shall see."

The heavy tread of feet on the outside apprised them of the approach of some one, and a moment later the bolts and bars were withdrawn, the door opened, and a heavy, thick-set, brutal-looking man entered.

"Oh, ho, my hearties," exclaimed he, jeeringly, "so yer awake, are yer? Well, that saves me the trouble of kicking yer inter life. The captain and his kid's gone ter New York, and he told me to keep a good guard over yer. So you've come back to us, Snooksy, have yer? We've got a nice little score agin yer for squealin' on us, and we'll pay it off; yer bet we will."

"You're a wicked scoundrel, Red-Handed Mike," retorted Snooksy, defiantly, "and I'm glad that I've shook you and the gang."

"Glad, are yer?" savagely cried the ruffian; "well, yer'll sing another tune to-morrow by daybreak, when yer'll be taken out an' strung up on a tree. We'll show yer how we treat traitors and deserters. An' yer needn't think yer can escape by the trap, the way ye did the last time. That 'ere machine's been closed up, and yer might as well say good-bye ter life, for you'll surely be hung to-morrow."

"We'll see about that," quietly replied the lad.

"Yis, we'll see," said the man, placing on the floor a jug of coffee and some slices of bread which he had brought along with him. "For some reason or other the captain told me to give the other chap his supper, an' I suppose he'll share it with yer. Well, all I've got ter say is, eat hearty, for it's the last meal yer'll ever eat in this world."

So saying he left the room, carefully locking and bolting the door behind him.

"Was it by the trap that you wanted to escape?" asked Mac, when they were once more alone.

"Yes," replied Snooksy, despondingly. "I'm afraid they've got the best of us this time."

"No, they ain't," cheerfully asserted the boy engineer. "We'll beat them yet. Let's eat our supper first, for I'm as hungry as a wolf, and I'll tell you of the idea I've got."

They speedily dispatched the coffee and bread, and the meal did more than anything else to inspire them with renewed strength and hope.

"Now, what's your idea?" asked Snooksy. "We've got to escape to-night, for I should not wonder but what they'd hang me in the morning."

"My plan is to fire the shanty."

"Fire the shanty?" ejaculated his companion.

"Yes."

"We'd be burnt to death."

"No we wouldn't. We kin gather all the rubbish together in a heap in one corner right under the roof and pack the straw around it. I always carry matches with me, and we'll have a roaring blaze in a minute. Of course there'll be plenty of smoke and heat, but I think that there'll be a hole burnt into the roof in less than no time, sufficiently large enough to enable us to crawl through."

"And if we fail?"

"Well," grimly replied Mac, "then there won't be any necessity to hang you in the morning. It's a desperate thing, I know, but it's the only chance we've got. Are you willing to undertake it with me?"

"I am. There's my hand on it."

The two boys clasped their hands together, and for a few moments stood silently gazing into each other's face.

"Snooksy," said Mac, his voice slightly trembling, "we may both escape or both be burned to death, or then again, one of us alone may get free. If I should die and you be saved, you will go to my foster-parents and Effie, won't you? You will tell them all how my single act of disobedience to them has been the cause of my death, and how sorry I was for it; you will ask them to forgive me and to think of me kindly. You'll do this, won't you?"

He gazed wistfully at his friend, and a tear, which he could not repress, issued from his eye and coursed slowly down his cheek.

"I will, Mac, I will," huskily replied Snooksy. "Though maybe the good Father in heaven, what

Mrs. Norton's told us about, will be kind to us an' let us both escape. If one of us is bound to die, I hope it's me, seein' you've got kind friends, who love you like as if you were their own flesh an' blood, while poor Snooksy is all alone in the world. I've never had nothin' but rags an' blows till you took me in, an' if I die there'll be nobody that'll care anyway."

The rude pathos of the poor waif sent a thrill of emotion through Mac's breast, and impulsively he wound his arm around his waist and embraced him.

"No, no, Snooksy," he said earnestly, "you've got friends now who will mourn for your loss as much as they will do for mine. We shan't either of us die, and we'll never do anything again to grieve the hearts of those who love us."

They continued their conversation long into the night.

From below they could hear the sound of boisterous revelry.

Evidently the gang was taking advantage of the absence of their leader to indulge in a drunken spree, and the clinking of the glasses, and the shouts and snatches of ribald song which the boys heard, convinced them that the desperadoes were demolishing a great quantity of vile liquor, and would be soon all stupefied with drink.

This was a welcome fact to them, for it gave them the assurance that the fire would not be discovered until they could have made good their escape.

If the thought that perhaps the drunken wretches might be burnt to death in the general conflagration entered their minds, they gave no heed to it, for it was a matter of life and death to the boys, and their self-preservation was to be secured at any price.

The riotous sounds continued late into the night, then they gradually ceased, and an intense silence reigned supreme.

The boys waited yet awhile, and then the continuing stillness convincing them that the gang were all asleep, they set about to construct what might become either their beacon of rescue or their funeral pyre.

The inflammable materials being properly arranged, Mac drew forth a match from his pocket, and striking a light, applied it to the mass.

In an instant a bright tongue of flame darted upward to the roof, and the garret became full of smoke.

Fortunately there were no panes of glass to the window, and the boys pressed their faces to the bars so that they could inhale the pure air from without, until the flames should afford them an outlet through the roof.

It took scarcely a minute for the fire to communicate itself to the dry timber of which the roof was composed, and a sudden draft of air that for a moment blew the flame back showed that the desired opening had been made.

Now came the decisive moment.

"Follow me," cried Mac, springing on the window sill, and thence grasping the burning and charred rafters with both his hands, he drew himself through the opening on to the roof.

A minute later and Snooksy stood at his side.

"Your clothes are on fire," cried Mac, tearing off the burning strips of garment. "Are you hurt?"

"No, and you?"

"My hands are blistered, but no matter. We must get off the roof. Ah, the gang have discovered the fire."

The heat and smoke had awakened the ruffians from their drunken slumber, and they sprang to their feet, utterly dumbfounded and bewildered.

"We'll have to jump it," said Snooksy, "it's only a dozen feet to the ground and the earth is soft."

"Here goes then."

They simultaneously sprang into the air and reached the soil unhurt.

"Now let's cut it and run," cried Mac.

And run they did, but not a dozen paces before they found themselves clutched in a man's powerful grasp.

"Not so fast, my jolly young coves," exclaimed he.

"Velveten George!" gasped Mac, recognizing his captor.

"An' Jimmy the Twister, yer bet!" exclaimed that young hopeful, giving Snooksy a rap over the head with his fist.

CHAPTER IX.

It was a sad disappointment to the boys to be thus recaptured after having safely made their escape from the burning hut, and they struggled violently to free themselves from Velveten George's grasp.

But whatever success might have attended their efforts was frustrated by the appearance of the rest of the gang on the scene.

Mac and Snooksy were speedily overpowered and tied to the trunks of two trees by means of some stout whiplash which one of the gang happened to have in his pocket.

"Curse you, you young varmints!" yelled Red-Handed Mike; "you'll roast us alive, will yer? Cap," added he, turning to Velveten George, "I move we chuck 'em into the flames."

"Yer kin do so with that little snake of a Snooksy," replied the convict, indifferently. "I've got other plans for the other kid."

"Ah, what's ther good av chuckin' him in ther fire," exclaimed Jimmy. "He'd be roasted in a minute, an' where'd the fun come in? No, let's hang him. That's the ticket. Jiminy, how he'd bob up and down! It would be better'n a circus?"

"Yes, yes," chorused the ruffians, "let's hang him!"

"You can do with him what you please," said Velveten George. "As far as burning down the old shanty is concerned, I intended ter do that myself to-morrow night. The place is getting too warm for us anyhow, and as I'm ter git a pile of 'rocks,' I was thinking of taking the whole gang out West. Things are more lonely out there, and there's less chance of being robbed."

"So the old shebang is gone," continued he, as the hut at that moment fell into a mass of burning and charred ruins. "We'll have ter hide in the cave until we leave this part of the country."

Now just finish yer little sport, an' then we'll turn in."

To say that the prospect of his approaching death did not terrify Snooksy, would be to affirm of him a bravado and recklessness which he did not possess.

Life to him was as dear as to any other boy of his age, and his face became deathly pale, his fettered limbs trembled, and hot tears dashed from his eyes.

"Wicked men," he said, pleadingly, "can you go heaping this new sin on yer hearts. I'm only a poor miserable boy an' yer drove me ter peach on yez by the blows an' curses yer guv me; don't kill me, don't hang me; let me live an' I'll never said a word agin yer. Yer goin' far away an' I can't do yer any harm anyway. Please don't murder me."

"None but a cowardly set of ruffians like you," added Mac, his eyes flashing with indignation, and his voice ringing with scorn and contempt, "would attempt such a fiendish deed as you are about to do. Why my life is to be preserved I do not know; probably to endure tortures worse even than death. But I say this, that if the sight of this poor boy dangling from the limb of a tree affords you so much amusement, why not string me up beside him, and in the words of that little snake there you'll have a double circus."

"Oh, stow yer gab," exclaimed Jimmy, pulling him by the nose, an indignity which Mac would have been quick to resent had his hands only been loose; "this here ain't none of your funeral; Snooksy goin' ter be hung an' that settles it. You're right though, when yer say that yer'll be wishin' yerself dead. My dad's goin' ter take yer in hand, an' though yer too costly ter him ter kill yer, he'll knock half the life out of yer anyway. Won't you, dad?"

"That's the programme, Jimmy," replied his worthy sire.

"I'd knock the whole life out of you," cried Mac, "if you'll only set me at liberty for a minute."

"Come now, let's start the circus," exclaimed Red-Handed Mike, who had gone in search of a rope and now returned with one.

He threw the hempen cord over a stout limb of the tree, to which Snooksy was bound, and then forming a slip-knot at one end of the rope he passed the noose over the poor lad's head and fastened it under his chin.

The terrible strain on the boy's nerves caused him to faint, and his head fell forward on his breast. As for Mac, he shut his eyes to hide from his sight the terrible deed which he was powerless to avert.

"Now," cried Mike, "all hands get hold of the rope, and when I cut him loose, give a pull an' up he goes."

All the ruffians, with the exception of Velveten George, grasped hold of the rope, Jimmy along with the rest.

"One, two, three!" cried the young scapegrace; "bounce him."

With a clasp-knife Mike cut the cord, and the unfortunate lad swung up into the air, and dan-

gled at about an equal distance from the tree and ground.

At this instant a rifle shot rang out from behind the trees, and a bullet, fired with unerring aim, cut the rope in twain.

Snooksy fell to the ground limp and apparently lifeless, and the sudden release of his weight from the rope caused the ruffians, who were pulling it, to tumble to the earth in a heap.

Before they could spring to their feet a detachment of Jersey militia, with their guns to their shoulders, rushed out from the thicket, where they had lain concealed, and made them prisoners. The shouts and hurrahs with which the soldiers had come to the rescue caused Mac to open his eyes, and a moment later, being freed from his bonds by the knife of a soldier, he was bending over Snooksy trying to recall him to life.

This opportune advent of the militia was due to the following fact: Ever since the wrecking of the train, which we have already described, the Governor of New Jersey had taken the matter in hand, and determined to rout out the desperadoes by force of arms.

The subject was kept a profound secret even from the newspapers; but efficient detectives were placed on the trail, and after they had reported that the lone hut was undoubtedly the rendezvous of the railroad wreckers, a troop of militia was dispatched to capture the villains, with the result above mentioned.

Their triumph, however, was somewhat dimmed by the escape of Red-Handed Mike, Velveten George and Jimmy.

The leader had indeed caught sight of the concealed troops at the moment the shot was fired, and knowing that his gang would surely be overcome by the superior numbers and discipline of the armed soldiers, he suddenly caught up his son in his arms and disappeared in the forest.

There he was a moment later joined by Mike, who had made good his escape while the militia were overcoming the ruffians on the ground.

"They've got the best of us this time," growled Mike.

"Yes, yes, but there's no time to lose. We must reach the cave if we want to save our necks."

"Won't they find us there?" asked Jimmy.

"No. None but the gang know of the secret entrance, and they won't peach on us."

The three hastily started in the direction of their subterranean hiding-place.

In the meantime the captured ruffians were placed in single file, guarded on either side by the soldiers, with drawn weapons, ready to shoot down the first one who made the least attempt to escape; the still unconscious Snooksy was carried in the arms of a brawny corporal.

Mac fell into the ranks, and a detachment of six men being left behind to scour the vicinity for the escaped desperadoes, and to see that the fire from the hut did not communicate to the surrounding forest, the rest took up the march towards the nearest village, which they reached at daybreak.

Here, by appointment, a special train awaited them, which conveyed the party to Jersey City, where the prisoners were delivered up to the sheriff of the county and brought to jail.

During the march through the forest Snooksy already began to show signs of returning life, and by the time they were on the train he was quite restored and exceedingly thankful for his narrow escape.

The boys were overjoyed to discover that their old friend Jack Thompson was on the locomotive in the capacity of fireman, and they soon presented themselves to him in the cab.

"Mac and Snooksy, or their ghosts, by jingo," exclaimed the fireman as he caught sight of them. "Why, you young scalawags, what the deuce have you been doing with yourselves? why, do you know that Bill's been worrying himself well on your account? most people worries themselves ill, I know, but when you didn't come home night afore last, and Mary told him so, he gets right up out of his sick-bed, an' says he: 'I'm better now, an' I'm going to look for those boys; and sure enough, better he was. He's been hunting all over New York for yez, an' Mary's been goin' on fearfully, an' Effie—'"

"What about Effie?" agitatedly asked Mac.

"Oh, find out when you see her," mischievously replied Jack, with a merry twinkle in his eyes.

Mac then related the adventures through which he and Snooksy had passed, and the train having reached Jersey City, by the time he concluded, they bid a hasty farewell to Jack, and taking a car rode over to Hoboken.

We will not describe the meeting between the boys and Mary and Effie.

However much the mother and daughter felt inclined to scold them, the recital of the dangers

the lads had overcome changed their anger at anxiety to deep thankfulness.

"Bill is still out hunting for you two," said Mrs. Norton, applying a bandage to Mac's blistered hands, which still continued to smart. "When he returns, I shall insist upon it that we move away from here. I have suspected that Velveten George was your enemy ever since you spoke to me about your last meeting with him, and we must go where he cannot find you."

"Here comes father," cried Effie, who was glancing out of the window.

A moment later Bill entered the room.

"So you're back, are you?" said he, cordially shaking the boys by the hand. "Well, you needn't tell me your story, for I know all about it. It's in everybody's mouth at the depot. Mary," added he, turning to his wife, "pack up what things we've got, and be ready to start this afternoon. We take the six p. m. through train for San Francisco."

"San Francisco!" ejaculated she in surprise.

"Yes. The president of our road has just received a letter from a friend of his in California, who is about starting a new road from Los Angeles to San Francisco, asking him to send on two engineers and two firemen. He offered me the position, with the privilege of taking along whom I choose. Jack Thompson's willing to go, and with Mac and Snooksy, will just fill up the team. I want to get away to-night so as to give the slip to Mac's enemies."

The six o'clock train which left New York for San Francisco that evening carried along with it our party, but whether the slip was given to those who thirsted for the blood of our hero, the sequel will show.

CHAPTER X.

THROUGH A SEA OF FIRE.

"THE prairie is on fire." It was towards the end of their fifth day from New York, and the train was passing one of those long stretches of open country which form the eastern boundary of California.

With an uninterrupted journey they would reach San Francisco at dusk on the following day.

In the forward car sat Mrs. Norton and Effie, together with Bill and Jack Thompson, while in the cab of the engine were Mac and Snooksy.

The boys had scraped acquaintance with the engineer and fireman soon after the start, and being in the profession had naturally been allowed to ride in the cab.

Indeed, Mac had several times driven the engine, and was at this time standing with his hand on the throttle when the engineer uttered the exclamation recorded at the head of this chapter.

The glowing tints of the western sunset lit up the sky with a crimson refulgence, and glistened the long yellow, sun-dried grass with a golden radiance.

It was a scene worthy to be rendered for ever permanent by the brush of an artist.

At the startling cry both Snooksy and Mac glanced out of the window of the cab, but could see nothing to justify the engineer's assertion.

"I don't see any fire," said Mac.

"Where's the smoke?" asked Snooksy.

"Follow the direction of my hand," replied the engineer, pointing towards the horizon, "and tell me what you see."

"I see," said Mac, "a thin line of purplish black."

"It looks like a cloud," added Snooksy.

"That's smoke, youngsters. I've seen it many a time. It'll be plainer soon enough. We'll have the flames roaring around us like a pack of hungry fiends before we're half an hour older. We'll be surrounded by smoke and heat and flying sparks that'll make yer think we're riding through the infernal regions. The bufflers, an' antelopes, an' all kinds of wild animals'll rush agin us like mad, and try ter block us. If they do, it's death to every man, woman and child on the train. We'll have ter put on all steam an' rush the fire at the top of our speed. It's our only chance for life. Hark."

The train had been advancing at a goodly rate while he was speaking, and as he uttered the exclamation, a dull heavy roar, that sounded like the rush of mighty waters over a cataract, and, unlike anything that the boys had ever heard, came to their ears above the noise of the train rattling along the rails.

"Them's the flames," exclaimed the fireman, energetically piling more coals into the red-hot furnace. "We'll have ter run clean through 'em."

As by the wave of a magician's wand, the whole character of the scenery had now changed.

In the west, instead of the gentle golden radiance that shone there but a moment before, was seen a lurid blood-red sea of fire; hovering above it were dense clouds of smoke, extending their

funeral pall further and further, and covering the sky with a canopy of inky darkness.

To the noise and roar of the flames were now added the wild tramping and mad bellowing of a herd of terrified buffaloes who, in their attempts to escape a fiery death, were rushing headlong towards the train.

The scene at this moment was one of awful and terrible magnificence.

The passengers on board the train had by this time perceived the danger ahead, and their cries and shrieks were added to the general uproar.

The engineer turned to grasp the throttle, but Mac refused to surrender it.

The boy's countenance was pale, but there was a determined gleam in his eyes, and his breast rose and fell with tumultuous beating.

"You intrusted this engine to me," said he, and his voice was clear and distinct in its tones. "You promised to let me guide it through the night, and now I will keep you to your word."

"But the fire!" expostulated the engineer.

"I will run her through the flames."

For a moment the engineer hesitated. Then, patting the boy admiringly on the shoulder, he said:

"Mac, you're a brave lad. Just the kind of stuff to make a good engineer. Run her through, and I'll stand by you in case you need my assistance."

Mac thanked him with a smile, and then signaled the conductor into the cab.

"Sir," said he, when the official entered, "I have taken charge of this train, and I demand that you obey me."

Utterly dumbfounded, the conductor looked at the engineer and then at the boy, but could find no words to express his surprise.

"You hear me," calmly continued Mac. "See to it that all the windows and doors are shut down, and if any man attempts to leave his seat, shoot him down. That is all!"

"But, you young rascal," began the conductor. "Not a word from you, sir," imperiously interrupted the boy engineer, "or I'll put a bullet through your brains."

He leveled a pistol at the head of the conductor as he spoke, and that official who, by the way, was not a very strong-minded person, slunk back into the car with the firm belief that the regular engineer of the train had gone crazy.

"That settles the conductor," said Mac, "and now, Snooksy, you'll help the fireman shoveling on coal, and keep it up until either I shut off steam or the whole thing blows up. You, sir," continued he, turning to the engineer, "will please close the cab windows and attend to the gauges."

After that not a word was spoken by any one in the cab.

Mac opened wide the throttle, and the engine, under the combined influence of the added fuel and steam pressure, bounded along the rails like a bullet shot from a rifle.

Nearer and nearer to the flames thundered the train.

The smoke now completely enveloped them and rendered everything around them pitch dark, save directly in front where the fire shed a beacon-like radiance.

The air within the cab grew hot and heavy; it almost stifled the occupants to breathe it.

Faster and faster revolved the wheels, more and more coal was thrown into the blazing furnace; the gauge registered an ever-increasing pressure of steam.

As though hewn in adamant, the boy engineer stood there with one hand grasping the throttle and the other still holding his pistol.

Not a muscle of his body quivered; he seemed scarcely to breathe; the stern, determined expression of his countenance seemed engraven there with a sculptor's chisel, it was so fixed and permanent.

But those sharp, scintillating gray eyes—what a world of deathless daring, of undaunted spirit and fleet courage flashed from their liquid depths, as they looked straight into the fiery sea through which the train must pass.

A shock, a creak, a groaning and straining, a momentary pause, and then the engine once more dashes on its furious way.

The cow-catcher had struck the foremost buffalo of the stampeding herd, and had dashed it mangled and lifeless to one side.

After that that the shocks came in rapid succession.

The train was passing through the herd.

At ordinary speed it would have been blocked by the living obstacles in its path, but now, at the terrible rate at which it was thundering on, it swept the animals from the rails like grain before the mower's scythe.

The herd is now past, and with the wild, de-

spairing shriek of a lost soul hurled into purgatory, the train dashes into the flames.

For the next few moments it seems to the choking, stifling, gasping passengers that they are enduring the tortures of the damned.

The seething, hissing, lurid tongues seem licking the cars on all sides, the train has caught on fire in several places, the smoke and flames are penetrating into the interior of the cars.

Strong men become deadly faint, women fall insensible to the floor, the children try to shriek, but the smoke prevents them.

The agony is fast becoming unendurable when fortunately the train has passed through the belt of fire, and the boy engineer, who has not faltered a moment in the terrible responsibility he had assumed, brings the cars to a halt in the midst of the charred and blackened district, just swept by the flames, and at a distance of some two hundred yards west of the conflagration.

The wind blowing in the direction traveled by the flames had taken along with it the smoke and particles of ashes floating in the air, and left a pure, refreshing breeze behind.

The doors and windows of the cars were hastily thrown open, and those who had not lost their consciousness during the awful moments, carried the fainting ones out into the open air.

The fire, which here and there broke out from portions of the train, was quickly extinguished, and as the passengers gradually revived, they exchanged fervent congratulations at having passed the danger without any loss of life.

As soon as the train had been brought to a halt, Mac, with a simple "thank you," resigned the throttle to the care of the engineer, and with Snooksy hastily left the cab to see if any harm had befallen those nearest and dearest to him.

Both Mrs. Norton and Effie had fainted away, but by the time the boys reached them they had sufficiently recovered to greet them with great affection.

"Thank Heaven," fervently exclaimed Mary, "that we are all preserved from a horrible death."

"Next ter Heaven," observed Snooksy, with a merry twinkle in his eyes, "I guess yer ort ter be thankful ter Mac, for 'twas he who run the engine through."

"Yer don't mean for to say," exclaimed Jack Thompson, "that the engineer gave Mac charge of the engine?"

"That's the solemn truth, Jack," asseverated Snooksy.

"Mac, my boy," cried Bill, grasping his hand and shaking it heartily, "I'm proud of yer. Yer wanted ter show these Western folks the grit of a Jarsey boy engineer, an' ye've done it, my boy, ye've done it nobly."

This praise gratified Mac more than the largest pecuniary reward could have done.

"I confess," said he, modestly, "that it was rather impudent on my part to keep charge of the engine at such a critical moment, but I did my duty, sir, and have succeeded."

"And you deserve a kiss for it," cried Effie, impulsively throwing her arms around Mac's neck and giving him a rousing smack.

By this time the cars had been thoroughly ventilated, and the passengers once more re-entered them. Mac would have liked to return to the engine and run her through to daylight, as the engineer had promised to allow him to do, but neither Mary nor Effie would permit it, and he was obliged to remain with them, and suffer himself to be made a hero by the passengers, who had by this time discovered to whom they owed their rescue from the flames.

Nothing of importance occurred on the remainder of the trip, and promptly at the appointed time the train arrived at its depot, and our hero and his friends were in the far-famed Eldorado of the West.

CHAPTER XI.

ON THE TRAIL.

ESTELLE MOWBRAY sat alone in her boudoir.

It was long past the hour at which Velveten George had promised to bring into her presence the boy for whose death she thirsted, and he had not yet made his appearance.

She grew anxious and excited, and unable longer to remain in an inactive position, sprang up from her seat and paced the room with agitated strides.

"Can he have been deceiving me?" muttered she, clutching her hand nervously. "But no, he would not have dared to act so boldly as he did

yesterday, if he had not in his power the means to crush me. Oh, how I wish he would come and bring both brats along with him. I have all prepared. Into a bottle of wine I have poured a subtle poison, that acts slowly but surely, and leaves no trace behind to betray its presence. I have risked so much to maintain my wealth and rank in society, that I do not hesitate even to sacrifice three lives to render my position secure. What care I that one is my husband and the other my son. I will do the world a service by riding it of a hardened villain and crushing the egg that can only breed a venomous serpent. And as for the third, humph! I only send him to join his parents in the blissful realms above. Hark! what was that?"

The exclamation was called forth by the sound of small pebbles striking against the panes of one of the windows, which looked out upon the gardens attached to the rear of the mansion.

"That must be he," exclaimed she, excitedly. "He probably fears to enter the house. I must go into the garden to meet him."

Hastily wrapping a light shawl around her shoulders and over her head, so as to conceal her form and figure, she stole silently out of the room and house, and entered the spacious garden.

In one corner thereof, shaded by a mass of foliage, was a rustic arbor, and as she approached this, a tall man, enveloped in a long black mantle, and whose features were mostly hidden beneath a bushy black mustache and beard, arose from within, and advanced a step towards her.

She did not recognize him, and with a slight cry recoiled from him, and would have hastened back into the house, had he not caught her jeweled wrist with a firm grip, and hissed in her ear:

"Hush! Do you want to get the cops down on us?"

"Velveteen George," murmured she, with a sigh of relief.

"Yes."

"I did not recognize you. Why this mummery?"

"Come into the arbor and I'll tell you. It's too risky to stand here in the moonlight."

They entered the dark inclosure, and then Estelle asked:

"Where is the boy?"

"Your son, Estelle?"

"No, no," cried she, impatiently, "not that brat. The other one."

"He has escaped."

"Escaped!" angrily exclaimed she; "and you have come here to tell me that?"

"But I'm on his clew," deprecatingly replied the convict. "I've discovered that he left by this evening's train for San Francisco. I'll go after him. I'll get him again into my power. All I want is some money to pay my expenses."

"Of course that's what you want. But you shan't get any from me. If I am rightly informed you are or were a railroad wrecker in New Jersey. Your profession ought to yield you sufficient plunder."

"But, Estelle, haven't you read the papers today? Here is a copy of the *Herald*," said he, drawing the paper from his pocket and handing it to her. "You will find all my statements corroborated."

He then gave a description of the burning of the hut, the capture and subsequent escape of the boys, the particulars of which are already known to our readers, and then continued:

"There was a good deal of swag destroyed by the destruction of the shanty, but that was not the worst of it. Jimmy, Red-Handed Mike, and myself had just got into our cave when the cursed militia came down on us. They had seen Mike enter, and thus discovered the opening. We couldn't tell how many were after us, and, therefore, to make any resistance would be foolish. We led them a rough chase through the secret galleries, and, owing to our superior knowledge of the place, managed at last to give them the slip; but all the plunder in the cave, and there was lots of it there, fell into their hands. Consequently, I'm dead broke, and can't go on in this job without money."

"But what assurance have I that this Mac, as you call him, is really the son of George Mowbray and Effie Raymond, and the true heir?"

"You've only got to see him to recognize the likeness; he's the very picture of his mother."

"But how can I see him now, even if you should succeed in capturing him in California? It wouldn't be safe to bring him all the way back to New York."

"That is so," replied Velveten George. "But I have an idea. You furnish me with the requisite, and I'll go to San Francisco with Jimmy and Mike, with to-morrow's train, if the cops don't lug me before that time, and you can follow, say in a week, and take up lodgings in the

furnished hotel in the city. I'll produce him there."

"It's a bargain," replied she. "I'll be in California in two weeks from to-day."

"And by that time I hope to have the brat under my thumb."

"Here's the money," said she, handing him a roll of bills which she had that morning drawn from her bank, "and now be off."

"Not a kiss or embrace, Estelle," cried he, in a tone of mock pathos, "for the sake of 'auld lang syne.'"

"I would rather place a cup of poison to your lips," replied she, haughtily, as she left the arbor and re-entered the house.

"Humph," growled the convict, as defiant as ever; "no matter, my fine lady, my time will come. You shall be humbled to the dust before me."

Carefully concealing the money about his person, he scaled the low wall which separated the garden from the dark side street, and with his features well muffled, cautiously proceeded on his way to the crib where Jimmy and Red-Handed Mike were awaiting his return.

On the same night on which the meeting between Velveteen George and Mrs. Mowbray took place, the asylum in which the crazed inventor was confined was found to be in flames.

It was never definitely ascertained how the fire originated, though it was rumored to have been due to the negligence of a drunken keeper.

The building itself was of stone, but the arrangement of the wooden floors and galleries was such as to act like a flue and make the flames master of the situation almost as soon as they were discovered.

Situated at some distance from the nearest town, and being but inadequately provided with means to extinguish the fire, the building was given up as lost, and the attention of the warden and his attendants directed to the difficult problem of rescuing the imprisoned maniacs from a fiery death, and yet not to let them regain their freedom.

The pen fails to describe the terrible incidents of that conflagration.

Most of the unfortunate creatures were able to understand the danger which menaced them, and their shrieks and cries and piteous wails were terrible to hear.

Incarcerated behind the heavily-barred iron doors, in some cases manacled hand and foot, with no chance of escape, and rendered desperate by the heat and smoke, they dashed out their brains against the stone floors, and thus found relief from their tortures in death.

A few whose minds were a total wreck looked upon the flames as angels sent from heaven for their release, and hailed their advance with singing and dancing, laughing and giving various utterances to their joy, all of which was in fearful contrast to the anguish and despair around them.

We cannot linger to detail the sufferings of each one of the unhappy inmates.

Our concern is with the maniac who had conceived such a sudden and unaccountable hatred towards our young engineer.

The old man was confined in a cell on the upper tier directly under the roof, and his position was a comparatively favorable one.

The flames had broken out in a lower story, and if he could only force his way out of the cell he might escape through the scuttle in the roof.

He was fully conscious of his danger, and his great strength, which is a marked feature of all maniacs, seemed, for the time being, doubled. It was also a fortunate circumstance that the manacles, which, after his capture, had been placed on his wrists and ankles, had, upon the advice of the visiting physician, been removed the day before.

Grasping the iron bars of the door, ordinarily sufficiently strong to baffle all his efforts to rupture them, he bent them away with one wrench, and forced his body through the opening thus formed.

He was now in the gallery, and paying not the slightest attention to the cries and groans of the lunatics around him, and who kept begging him to come to their release, he rushed up the stairs leading to the roof.

To force the scuttle open was but the work of a minute, and he was the first one to emerge on the top of the burning building.

A smile of cunning triumph now lit up his withered countenance.

"I've escaped before in this way," muttered he, "and I'll do it again. The tree, whose topmost branches almost touch the roof. That was the means, yes, that was the means."

He ran to one side of the roof, and not ten paces from it was the crown of a giant oak.

He sprang boldly off the roof, and fortunately landed in the branches of the tree.

Then he slid down the trunk, and having reached the ground made a bee-line for the forest, leaving the keepers, ignorant of his escape, to battle with the flames and their howling prisoners.

Whether the maniac had any definite purpose in view, or knew where he was going, we do not know, but he kept on his march through the forest, never stopping, never seeming to tire, until just as the dawning sun was gilding the eastern skies he reached Jersey City.

On a side track near the Erie Railway depot stood an empty freight car, and crawling into this he bundled himself up in a dark corner and went to sleep.

Thoroughly exhausted, he was not awakened by the fact that shortly afterwards a locomotive was attached to the car, and it was drawn from the side track and connected with a train in the depot.

"Is that car to remain empty?" asked the baggage-master of an official of the road.

"Yes," was the answer, "until you reach Chicago."

"All right. I'll lock it, then, or there'll be a couple of tramps trying to beat their fares in it."

And without looking to see if any one was in the car, the baggage-master locked and bolted the door.

Shortly before six o'clock, the hour for the train to leave, two men and a boy came on board.

All three were pretty well mantled up as though they wished to escape recognition, and having purchased their tickets, entered the smoking-car.

They were Velveteen George, Red-Handed Mike and Jimmy.

Several other passengers got on the train. Promptly on the minute it steamed out of the depot on its way to California.

Thus by a strange fatality twelve hours had hardly elapsed since Mac had left the city before his enemies were on his track.

CHAPTER XII.

MAC'S OVATION.

If ever Byron woke one morning and found himself famous, that same experience occurred to Mac on the morning after his arrival in San Francisco.

The party had taken lodgings in a second-rate but respectable hotel, and the men and boys were up bright and early, intending to take a walk through the beautiful city before presenting themselves to the president of the road, to whom they had been directed.

At the breakfast-table Mac noticed that several of the guests, who were reading the morning papers, kept eying him curiously, and ignorant of the reason of this marked attention, it somewhat ruffled his temper.

However, he said nothing, and the meal being concluded, he, with Snooksy, Mr. Norton and Jack Thompson issued from the hotel into the street.

What was their surprise to find gathered before the hotel quite a large crowd, who commenced to cheer lustily at their appearance.

"There he is."

"That's him."

"Hurrah for little Mac."

"Three cheers for the boy engineer."

These and similar cries filled the air.

"Father," asked Mac, addressing Bill, "is that the ordinary way in which strangers are welcomed to this city?"

"No, my boy," replied he, while a proud, happy look illuminated his features. "But you are no ordinary stranger. These people have read in the papers how you ran the train through the fire, and that's the reason they're cheering you."

At this moment an elderly gentleman of grave and venerable appearance elbowed his way through the crowd, and approaching Mac, extended his hand to him and said:

"You are Master Norton, I believe?"

"Yes, sir," modestly replied Mac, wondering who the old gentleman was.

"I am Nathaniel Johnson," said the stranger, cordially shaking the boy's hand.

"The President of the Los Angeles Branch Road?" cried Bill, doffing his hat.

"The same," replied Mr. Johnson, with a smile.

"We were recommended to you, sir," deferentially continued Bill, handing him a letter. "I am Bill Norton, engineer; this is Jack Thompson, fireman, and that is Snooksy, fireman and chum of Little Mac, with whom you seem to be already acquainted."

"This morning's papers are full of his heroism and bravery," said the president; "and besides I had already last night received a verbatim account of the run from the mouth of the engineer, who was on board the train. I surmised that he belonged to the party which my friend of the New

Jersey road promised to send me, and have come this morning to assure myself of the fact. Whatever compunction I might have against giving a train on my new road into charge of one who is still a boy in years, is dispelled by that exhibition of coolness, nerve and thorough knowledge of engineering."

"He is my adopted son and pupil, sir," proudly replied Bill, "and though I say it myself, there's not a better engineer than he in the United States."

The people, the most of whom knew the railroad president by sight, had remained quiet spectators while this colloquy was taking place. Mr. Johnson now turned to them and said:

"MY FRIENDS—The long-expected opening of the Los Angeles Branch Road will take place to-day. All our new cars and locomotives are already in the depot, the location of which you know. We were but awaiting the arrival of the engineers and firemen. I need hardly tell you that the gentlemen and boys here beside me are the expected persons. Mr. Norton and Mr. Thompson here will drive the *Pacific*, while little Mac and Snooksy will take charge of the new locomotive, which is as yet unchristened. I invite you all to be at the depot at twelve o'clock this noon. We will have a little celebration in honor both of the naming of the new locomotive and of the first trip to be made by the officers of the road and their invited guests. Now, as a favor, I beg you to disperse and meet again at the depot."

These few remarks were frequently interrupted by cheers, and at their close there were repeated calls for a speech from Mac, but he remained silent at the president's advice; the crowd gradually departed, and our party, with Mr. Johnson, re-entered the hotel.

In the parlor they met Mrs. Norton and Effie, who had by this time partaken of their breakfast and had been watching, at the window, the animated scene below.

An introduction to the president followed, and the gentleman capped the climax of his kindness by offering them, rent free, a pretty cottage on the line of the railroad, and but a few miles from Los Angeles.

"You are too kind," murmured Mary, hesitating to accept the generous offer.

"Nonsense," replied the good-natured president. "There's a selfish reason for my action. You see the cottage belonged to my mother, who has recently died, and as my wife and family would rather live in a fashionable house in San Francisco, I would have to let it to perfect strangers, or suffer it to go to rack and ruin. Now, you may say that I know you but since a short time, but believe me, madam, when I say that in that space of time I have conceived a high regard for you and your amiable daughter, and I am sure that both you and her will do your best to keep the cottage in a neat and presentable condition. That will be ample consideration for the rent, and thus you see you are the one, who in accepting, is making me your debtor."

This neatly-worded reply settled the matter, and Mary could not help accepting the cottage after that.

"And now, Mrs. Norton," continued he, "I take the pleasure of inviting you and Effie to take part in the celebration and trial trip to-day. Of course your husband and the rest will be present, but who will drive the engine, that, for the present, must remain a secret."

And with a curious twinkle in his eye, the genial-hearted old gentleman arose and bade them all a cordial good-bye.

"That's the kind of a man I like to work for," enthusiastically exclaimed Jack Thompson, after the president had departed.

"You bet," cried Snooksy. "He lays right over our former superintendent."

"He's a splendid man," said Mrs. Norton. "How kindly he forced that cottage on me. I declare I don't know whether I've received or done a favor."

"Oh, mother," exclaimed Effie, delightedly, "just think of it. We'll have the cottage all to ourselves, and father and Jack, and Snooksy and Mac will live there, and I'm sure there's a pretty garden around it, with grapevines and honeysuckles. And I can tend the flowers and watch the trains go by, and won't I hurrah when I see father or Mac in the cab. As Snooksy would say, you just bet I will."

And overjoyed to get off this bit of slang without assuming the responsibility therefor, she danced around the room and successively embraced all present, Mac last, but not least.

The morning passed quickly, and having partaken of an early dinner our party shortly before noon started for the depot.

This they had no difficulty in finding, but they were hardly prepared for the sight there revealed to their eyes.

The depot itself was profusely decorated with

American flags, the platform was similarly ornamented, while before and around the latter a vast concourse of people, all tricked out in holiday costume, was congregated.

Escaping the observation of the crowd, Mr. Norton, according to the directions given him by the president, led his party through a side door into the depot, where they were received by that gentleman and introduced to several officers of the road and their ladies.

The ordinary *hauteur* sometimes manifested by employers toward their employees seemed to be entirely absent in those present, and our friends were received on the best of terms.

Here also was the train in which the first trip was to be made, and a number of painters were busy putting the finishing touches to a name they were painting on the locomotive. Flags, garlands of flowers and leaves, and various other decorations were being affixed to the train, while two colored waiters were actively engaged in opening several baskets of champagne, and in arranging a number of glasses on various trays.

A band of music now formed itself into a line, and the directors and their ladies joining in the procession, with the president and Mac at its head, the musicians struck up, "Here th Conquering Hero Comes," and all marched out on the platform.

The audience received the procession with tumultuous applause, and after this had quieted down the president advanced a few steps forward, and said:

"MY FRIENDS—Without undertaking at this moment to detail the labor and expense it has cost us to build and equip this new and necessary road, I wish but to state that what we have undertaken has been achieved. Our business to-day is first to christen the new locomotive. You, my friends, to whose patronage we look to for success, shall have a voice in the matter. Doubtlessly you have all been informed of the heroic boy who has proved his courage and competency under circumstances that would have caused the stoutest hearts to quail. That boy stands besides me. He is to be in our services: he is to drive the new engine. His name is Little Mac, and now I ask you what shall we call the locomotive?"

A shout arose from the assembled multitude that fairly made the welkin ring:

"Little Mac!"

That was the cry, and the hollow confines of the depot echoed back:

"Little Mac."

"Then," said the president, "'Little Mac' it shall be."

The band played "Hail Columbia," a cannon was fired off, and, after a warning whistle, the train started out of the depot.

To the surprise and joy of our young hero, he beheld on the locomotive, painted in letters of gold, the name, "Little Mac."

The president had shrewdly taken time by the forelock, and neatly prevented Mac from seeing what the painters had been doing.

The colored waiters, meanwhile, had been busy passing foaming glasses of champagne among the guests on the platform, and in obedience to the cries of the excited populace, Mac stepped forward, glass in hand, and said:

"Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen:—I am only a boy, and I do not know how to express in words the feelings in my heart. I never expected this honor, and it now embarrasses me. I can drive an engine better than I can make a speech, and I pledge this glass to the hope that no evil will ever befall the Los Angeles Branch Road, or any one connected with it."

These words, entirely impromptu, and spoken with great emotion, roused the audience to the highest pitch of enthusiasm, and after the wine had been drank, and at a sign from the president, the guests had taken their place in the car, Mac, followed by Snooksy, sprang into the cab, and gave the signal for starting.

Amid the booming of the cannon, the playing of the musicians, the shouts and applause of the spectators and the congratulations and good wishes of all, the "Little Mac" thundered out of the depot, with our hero grasping the throttle in one hand, and triumphantly waving an American flag in the other.

CHAPTER XIII.

A FORTUNATE THROW.

The trip to Los Angeles was made by Mac in two hours less time than by the regular route, to which this branch road was to run in opposition.

The result more than exceeded the most favorable anticipations of the president and the directors.

After making a short stay at the terminus, and partaking of some refreshments, Mac ran the

train on the return track and started for San Francisco.

When about half an hour's distance from Los Angeles, Mr. Johnson, the president, came into the cab, and told Mac to slacken the train so as to bring it to a halt before a vine-embowered cottage about a hundred yards along the road.

This the young engineer did, and then Mr. Johnson said:

"That, Mac, will be your future home, and that of your foster-parents and friends."

"What a pretty place it is!" exclaimed Mac, enthusiastically.

"It's finer'n a palace," added Snooksy.

"Now, boys," continued the president, "jump off, and I'll tell the rest of your party to alight."

"But who's to run the engine back to 'Frisco?" asked Mac.

"An' who's to tend to the fires?" inquired his chum.

"I've looked out for that," pleasantly replied their friend, "and have two men in the cars who can manage the train. I'll send them into the cab."

He left the boys, and a minute later they were relieved from further duty, and, alighting from the engine, found Bill, Mary, Jack, and Effie already awaiting them.

The party gave three rousing cheers as the train moved on, and then repaired to their new home.

The structure itself was one of those low stone buildings built by the Spaniards in California, and known as adobe houses.

But the interior consisted of four or five rooms all neatly furnished and fully equipped with household articles. And the gardens, grape-vines and honeysuckles which surrounded the house were all that Effie had imagined.

They were agreeably surprised to find a neat Spanish girl awaiting them.

In somewhat broken English she informed them that she had been the maid of Mr. Johnson's mother, who had, previous to her decease, occupied the house, and that she had been advised of their coming, and had supper prepared for them, if they would be pleased to accept it.

Mary had always been accustomed to wait upon herself and family, but the services offered by Manuela, the Spanish maid, were none the less acceptable to her.

The first night was spent in examining all the rooms of the building and the gardens; and, thoroughly tired out, the party now retired to rest in the old-fashioned but comfortable Spanish bedsteads.

The men and boys were up with sunrise the next morning, and walking the distance to Los Angeles, reported for duty to the local superintendent.

He assigned a trail to Bill and Jack, and told the boys to ride to 'Frisco, where they would find the "Little Mac" awaiting them.

Two trips a day were made to the capital and back, and before a week had elapsed, the fame of the boy engineer had spread far and wide; and the public crowded his train as much for his sake as on account of the saving in time, and greatly to the disgrace and envy of the other road, which, until now, had enjoyed a monopoly of the route.

As might be naturally supposed this jealousy did not tend to establish any amicable feelings between the two routes, but for the present at least it did not exhibit itself in any more inoffensive way than in the publication of handbills and posters decrying the Los Angeles Branch Road, and declaring against the folly of intrusting the life and property of the passengers to the care of two boys.

One evening about a week after the opening of the new route, Mac was making the home-trip to Los Angeles.

The weather had during the day suddenly changed from fair to foul, and a fine drizzling rain was falling from the dull, leaden sky overhead.

It was already dark when the train rushed past their home, and the boys for the first time missed Effie's face from the door.

"She isn't there," exclaimed Mac, peering vainly through the darkness.

"Of course she ain't," said Snooksy. "Yer wouldn't want her to stand out in the rain, would yer?"

"No," replied Mac, in a low tone, more as if in answer to his own thoughts than to the question addressed to him. "But yet, it kinder makes me feel queer. I've never had an accident yet on this road, and I hope I never will, and, somehow, seeing Effie every time I passed here I sorter looked on her as a protecting angel. You may think it's all foolishness, Snooksy, but I tell you the fact that she wasn't standing before the door has made me nervous-like, and I shouldn't be a bit surprised if—"

Crash came something flying through the window of the cab.

"What's that?" cried both boys in concert.

"A lantern," exclaimed Mac, picking it up from the floor. "Our lantern. That means danger."

There was an apparatus connected with the train, by which the engineer could apply all the brakes at once and without the aid of the brakeman.

To shut off the steam and turn this mechanism was with Mac but the work of a moment, and the train came to a sudden halt to the great wonder and affright of the passengers.

Mac and Snooksy, each with a lantern in his hand, sprang from the engine and ran up the track, followed by a number of the passengers who had come out of the cars.

About ten feet from where the train was standing, there was a sharp curve, and directly behind this curve, and in such a position that those in the engine could not possibly have discovered it, was a perfect barricade of logs and fallen trees.

Had not the boys been warned by the throwing in of the lantern, the train would infallibly have been wrecked, and Heaven only knows what loss of life ensued.

The passengers who had followed the boys turned pale as they recognized how narrow had been their escape from death; and when Snooksy explained how they had been forewarned, the question that rose to their lips was:

"Who threw the lantern?"

"Effie," cried Mac.

Whether it was in answer to the question, or because at that moment the young girl, dripping with wet, pale and breathless, bounded into his arms, we do not know: but there she lay sobbing on his breast.

"Effie," asked Mac, pressing the young girl closer to him as though to shield her from the pitiless rain, "tell me, was it you who threw the lantern into my cab? was it you who saved all our lives?"

"Yes, yes," sobbed she, almost hysterically. "I didn't faint, though I thought all the world was dancing around me. I was firm; I'm weak and trembling now because I can't help it; but I stood beside the track, and when you came along—I didn't think of the train and the passengers; it seemed to me as if it was you all alone who was to be killed. I prayed to God for strength, and that He would direct the lantern, and it struck the window, didn't it? I heard the glass break, and then the train dashed by me, and I didn't know whether you could stop it in time; but you did, and the wicked men did not kill you."

And, as if to assure herself that he was indeed alive, she wound her arms around his neck, and pillowed her head on his shoulder.

He allowed her some time to quiet her agitation, and then he gently asked:

"But how did you happen to discover this fiendish design?"

"You know, Mac," replied she, raising her head and glancing lovingly at him, "that I always was by the door to greet you when you passed by the house, and, to-night, because it was dark and rainy and you might not see me, I lit the lantern and took it along."

"And while I was standing waiting for the train I began to think, how, I didn't know, of the curve, and that on such a night as this there ought to be somebody stationed there with a signal to see that the track was clear. And then like a streak of lightning the idea struck me that I would signal to you to-night."

"I ran towards the curve with all my might, and just before I got there I heard men's voices. I thought I should die for fright, and then, the next moment, I felt bound to find out what they were doing there."

"So I put out my light and crept along the bushes as softly as I could. I saw them just finishing placing the logs and trees across the track. There were two men and a boy, and I heard them talk of you and Snooksy, and that you had escaped them once, but wouldn't do it again."

"Velveteen George," interrupted Mac, with a start of surprise.

"And Red-Handed Mike an' Jimmy," added Snooksy. "I thort we'd left them villains behind us."

"They must have tracked us here," replied Mac.

"I didn't dare to stir," continued Effie, "and I was afraid every moment that they would discover me with the dark lanterns that they were carrying in their hands. But they didn't, and after they got through with their wicked work they went away, and I crept up along the track as far as I could, and waited for you. I had no match to light the lantern, and besides I didn't dare to do it for fear the light would betray me; so all I could do was to throw the lantern into the cab, and, thank Heaven, that was sufficient."

"Effie," exclaimed Mac, "you're a noble girl, and I'm proud of you. Come, you must go with me right into the house, or else you'll catch your

death of cold. Snooksy and the passengers will remove the obstructions, and in a few moments I'll be back and run that train to Los Angeles in spite of Velveteen George and all his gang."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE LITTLE JOKER.

THE next day as soon as Mac and Snooksy reached 'Frisco they reported the affair to the superintendent. The president happened to be in the office, and when the boys had finished the recital he asked:

"And are you sure that these rascals were your former enemies?"

"I am positive of it," replied Mac.

"Dead sure," added Snooksy.

"But from what you told me some days ago I should have supposed them to be still in New Jersey."

"Velveteen George," said the boy engineer, "is as slippery as an eel. You never know where he is until he turns up suddenly like a stage ghost out of a trap. He's anxious to get me in his power, or, failing that, to kill me. What his reason is is more than I know myself; but it would amply account for his presence here in California."

"You could identify him if you saw him?" asked Mr. Johnson.

"Yes, and so could Snooksy," eagerly responded Mac. "If we could only have a few days off, I'd guarantee to hunt him up and deliver him over to the police."

"I could manage to spare you and Snooksy from the train," musingly replied the president; "but wouldn't it be rather risky work for you two boys—this playing detective?"

"Not at all," answered Mac, his eyes sparkling with delight. "Velveteen George has until now been hunting me down; I'd just like to turn the tables on him, and beat him at his own game. Besides, I've been wishing to see life in San Francisco, and this will just give me the opportunity. And it's the same with Snooksy, isn't it?"

"You bet," replied his chum.

"You speak as if you were to confine your search to this city. How do you know that he is here?"

"Well, I don't know it, that's a fact, but if I visit all the dives and gambling-houses in the city, I believe I should find the whole gang in one of them. Men like Velveteen George and his pals stick to the city and the slums; they might go into the country for a while, but they'll turn up here every time."

"Well, boys," said the president, after a pause, "you shall have leave of absence for a week, and I will furnish you with whatever disguises and money you may need. It's my opinion that Velveteen George is acting as much on behalf of our rivals as on his own behalf, and for that reason I'm anxious to have him apprehended and summarily punished, together with the rest of his gang. When will you start your operations?"

"To-morrow," said Mac.

"All right. Meet me in this office at this hour to-morrow, and I'll have everything arranged for you."

Probably no city in the world, in comparison with the population, contains so many gambling-hells as the golden city of the West.

These are of all degrees of appearance, from the low-ceiled, dingy room in the Chinese quarters, where the pig-tailed Celestials stake their pennies, to the elegantly-furnished and costly-equipped palaces of vice, fronting the broad highways and fashionable thoroughfares of the city.

It is into one of these latter resorts that we introduce the reader at a late hour of the night of the day succeeding the one above mentioned.

We will not waste any time or space in describing this glittering abode of the "tiger," nor the various persons who have come to fight it.

Around a center-table where King "Faro" held sway, a motley group of men, composed partly of cool-headed sharps, but mostly of eager, excited and semi-intoxicated miners, were squandering the results of months and perhaps years of unremitting toil and labor.

"Make your bets, gentlemen," drawled the game-keeper, in that monotone so usual with men of his class.

"I'll cover the ace," exclaimed a young gent, dressed in the height of fashion, and with just the faintest outline of a mustache on his upper lip.

"The ace loses," drawled the dealer, and the banker raked in the money that had been bet on that card.

"Dem it, just my luck," cried the young sprig. "You Americans do manage to fleece us every time. No matter, though, we'll get our revenge when you come to England. This is a jolly good

country, anyhow, and I'm bound to see life no matter what it costs; James."

A young lad dressed like an English lackey advanced towards the young Englishman and asked:

"What, my lord?"

"The satchel."

The lackey handed him a small satchel, and the young sprig of nobility opened it rather ostentatiously, revealing quite a heap of golden coin. Taking out a handful of this he closed the satchel and placed the money on the table.

"I'll cover the Jack," said he.

The game went on for a few moments and then the dealer announced:

"Queen wins, Jack loses."

"That's a blarsted shame," exclaimed the Englishman, as he saw his gold raked in. "Say, I don't think I'll play this game any longer, or else I won't have any money to pay my passage home. Dem me, if I will. Ain't you got some other game?"

He felt a tap on his shoulder at this moment, and, turning round, beheld a young chap, who, by the way, was Jimmy the Twister, confronting him.

Jimmy motioned him to one side, and then whispered:

"Say, Mister, yer don't want ter play there no more. That's a skin game, an' they'll clean yer out of yer boots. If yer want to stake yer rocks in a square game, just come with me into the side room there, an' I'll interduce yer to a party what'll treat yer fair an' above board."

"Who are you, my boy?" asked the sprig, somewhat haughtily.

"Oh, I'm Jimmy the Twister, an' a bully boy round town, you bet. If you want to see the ropes just foller me."

"I'm the son of Lord Clarendon," said the Englishman, "and am on a visit to this blarsted country. You look like a jolly cove, and I don't mind if I do go along with you. James, you follow us."

Jimmy led the youthful master and servant into the side chamber already indicated, where, seated at a small table covered with green cloth, were Velveteen George and Red-Handed Mike.

"Dad," exclaimed Jimmy, "there's a young Britisher who wants ter tackle yer in a game of cards."

"I'm agreeable," said the ex-convict, leisurely playing with a pack in his hands. "What shall it be?"

"There was an American," said the sprig, seating himself at the table, "who visited my father's estate last year, and while there taught me to play euchre. It's a jolly nice game, and I haven't yet had a chance to play it in this country. I'll try a hand in it."

"All right. What shall be the stakes?"

"Five dollars a game."

"There are my stakes," said Velveteen George, throwing a gold coin on the table.

"And here are mine."

They cut for deal, and it fell to the desperado.

Mike and Jimmy sat near him, while the lackey stood behind his master's chair, and nearest to the door which led to the main parlor of the gambling hell.

Velveteen George shuffled the cards with all the ease and grace of an experienced gambler, and then, after the young scion of the noble house of Clarendon had cut the cards, dealt them, turning up a Jack.

The game commenced.

"That is the left bower," said the ex-convict, throwing down a card from his hand, "and this," added he, taking up the card which had turned up, "is the right bower. You will acknowledge yourself beaten?"

"No!" cried little Mac, suddenly dropping the disguise he had all along assumed; "there's a card to beat those; it is the little joker, and here it is!"

And Velveteen George started back with an ejaculation of rage and surprise as he saw a pistol held within five inches of his forehead.

That was the little joker.

CHAPTER XV.

A MYSTERIOUS BURGLAR.

THE instant that Mac displayed his revolver, Snooksy, who, of course, was no other than the disguised English lackey, blew a shrill signal with a small whistle, and, as if by magic, both the main parlor and the side chambers were filled with police.

More than half of the persons present, who had appeared to be ignorant miners, were in reality members of the San Francisco police force, and as they heard the signal, they threw off their disguises and displayed their clubs and revolvers before the eyes of the astonished gamblers.

The transformation was such a rapid one that

the prisoners made but an ineffectual resistance, and they were soon safely lodged in jail.

That very night, yet, Mac and Snooksy presented themselves at the residence of the president, and, having been admitted into his presence, reported the result of their expedition.

"You have done nobly, my boys," said Mr. Johnson, approvingly, "and I shall make a motion before the board of directors to vote you a handsome reward. At present you will follow the servant, who will direct you to a room where you can sleep to-night."

After some slight demurrer, the boys acquiesced in the request, little dreaming how important this determination would be before morning.

Bidding them a cordial "good-night," the president retired to his room, while Mac and Snooksy followed the servant into a cozily-furnished bedroom, situated on one of the upper floors of the building.

"This is what I calls first chops," exclaimed Snooksy, glancing around the room and examining the beautiful carpets, furniture and bedding. "I say, Mac, this 'ere bed's just the thing for a good snooze."

"Then let's turn in," yawningly replied Mac, "I'm as tired as a rooster which has been standing on one leg for a week. You know we had quite a trudge from one hell to another, before we struck the right one."

Having bolted the door and turned down the gas, the boys, who had in the meantime divested themselves of their clothes, sprang into the bed, and were soon sound asleep.

It was well known that Mr. Johnson was one of the richest men on the Pacific slope, and the costliness of the jewelry worn by his wife and daughter, as well as the valuable silver-plate used in the household, had on several occasions formed the subject of newspaper gossip.

These articles read by the burglar fraternity, as well as the ordinary public, had incited the knights of the jimmy and dark-lantern to make an attempt to gain possession of them.

A large safe standing in the president's sleeping apartment was the receptacle of these valuables, and some days previous a sneak thief had found occasion to sneak into this room and take an impression in wax of the keyhole of this safe.

The same rogue had also been making love to the cook, and besides sundry tit-bits from the kitchen had obtained a *fac-simile* key of the basement door.

These preliminaries being arranged, a date was chosen for the burglary, and by a peculiar coincidence the choice fell on the very night in which Mac and Snooksy were sleeping in the house to be feloniously entered.

How long the boys slept neither of them knew, but Snooksy was first awakened by a cry for help.

At first he thought he was dreaming, but the cry was almost immediately succeeded by a pistol shot.

In great affright he caught hold of Mac, who was still sleeping, by the wrist.

"Wake up, Mac," cried he, "for Heaven's sake, wake up."

"What's the matter?" yawned he, opening his eyes.

Another pistol shot effectively answered him.

"Good God!" exclaimed he, springing out of bed, "there's murder being committed in the house."

Snooksy had already arisen, and hastily putting on some clothes they grasped their revolvers firmly in their hands, and, having opened the door, rushed out into the hall-way.

Curses, groans, cries and the sound of scuffling greeted their ears. They came from Mr. Johnson's room. Thither they hastened. The door was open, and bounding into the room they found their employer, single-handed, keeping two masked villains at bay.

It was well that they rushed in at this opportunity, for the two shots they had heard had been fired by Mr. Johnson's double-barreled gun, and had but slightly wounded one of the burglars. He being now disarmed, the villains simultaneously made a rush upon him, intending to brain him with the iron bars they carried in their hands, when Mac fired at the foremost scoundrel, and hitting him in the upraised arm caused him to drop his bar with a howl of pain.

The other burglar made a dash for the boy, but Snooksy planted himself before Mac and shouted:

"I'll kill yer, if yer don't drop on yerself!"

It was wonderful to note the effect of these words.

The man started as though he had been stung by a serpent, staggered back a few paces, and dropping his iron bar, passed his hands across his forehead as if trying to recall the memory of past events.

"That voice!" muttered he, brokenly. "Oh, God, what have I done?"

Then, suddenly catching hold of Snooksy, he

bared the boy's but partly-covered bosom, and revealed in the dim light which was burning in the room a birthmark of peculiar shape.

"It is he!" cried he, wildly; "and I—I—"
He did not finish the sentence, but with the howl of a wild animal, dashed through the large, single plate mirror which opened into a balcony on the rear of the house, and thence swung himself across a fence into a side street, down which he disappeared.

So sudden, quick and unexpected had been this action on the part of the burglar, that neither the boys nor Mr. Johnson could prevent his flight, although Mac sent a bullet after him, which, however, failed to hit him.

The household, which had been aroused by the same noises which had awakened our two young heroes, but which were too cowardly to come to the president's assistance, now put in an appearance.

After the first excitement was over, several of the servants were ordered to put the doubly wounded burglar to bed and send for a physician and a policeman, while Mac and Snooksy had the pleasure of being introduced to Mrs. Johnson and her daughter.

This somewhat semi-dress affair being rather awkward for all parties concerned, was hastily concluded, and as further sleep was out of question for that night, it was determined that they should complete their toilets and meet in the library to discuss the situation.

They were all assembled there about a quarter of an hour later, and to their number were added the physician and policeman, who had in the meantime arrived.

The former reported that the captured burglar had a slight flesh-wound on one shoulder, which was of but little importance, as the ball had but grazed the skin; but that his arm had been broken by the second shot, and the bullet would have to be removed or the member amputated at the elbow. At the present time the man was insensible through loss of blood.

The policeman stated that he recognized the features as those of Scar-Faced Pedro, a noted Spanish cracksman, for whom the authorities had been on the watch for some time.

It was agreed to allow the ruffian to remain in the house until the morning, when he could be conveyed to the hospital.

The discussion next turned upon the extraordinary conduct of the second burglar, after the scene had been rehearsed.

"One would suppose," said the president, "from his actions that he recognized in Snooksy some one to whom he was ashamed to appear as a burglar."

"That's all fol de rol," exclaimed the policeman, with a knowing wink. "It was the deliberate trick of an experienced rogue. He knew that his only chance to escape being captured was in sudden flight, and what he said and did was but a bit of acting to put all of you off your guard."

"That seems plausible," said the physician.

The others all seemed to regard this theory as the correct one.

"Yer know," said Snooksy with a sigh, "that I never knew my father nor my mother, and sometimes I'd be thinking how jolly it would be if they'd turn up, and when that ere burglar acted the way he did the thought struck me that he might be my father. I'm glad, though, now, that it ain't, for I'd rather have no father at all than he should turn out to be a thief."

Snooksy's sensitiveness on this point was all the more remarkable considering his past associations.

The discussion was kept up until daybreak, and then, after partaking of a good breakfast, prepared at the direction of Mrs. Johnson, Mac and Snooksy bade good-bye to their grateful host and hostess, and turned their footsteps in the direction of the depot to take charge of the "Little Mac," there awaiting their coming.

"I say Snooksy," said Mac, "we've had plenty of adventure for one night, haven't we?"

"You bet. First Velveten George and his gang lugged, then this tussle with the burglars. I say, I wonder what'll turn up next."

Could either of them have foreseen the future, he would have been somewhat startled at the number of adventures through which they were destined still to pass.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE ATTACK.

ESTELLE Mowbray sat in her luxuriously furnished parlor at the Palace Hotel in San Francisco, holding in her hand a copy of the *Chronicle*.

It was on the morning of the day succeeding the one Velveten George had been captured, and two days after her arrival in the golden city of the West.

"The fool, the idiot," muttered she, again pe-

rusing the account of the capture. "So he's got himself into jail, has he? A fine schemer, indeed. Oh, were I a man, that brat wouldn't breathe the air of this world long."

The entrance of a servant interrupted this soliloquy.

"A clergyman wishes to see you, ma'am," said he.

"A clergyman?"

"Yes."

"What name did he give?"

"No name. He says he's from the prison."

"Send him here."

The servant departed, and a moment later, a tall, lean man, clad in ministerial black, and whose clean-shaven face wore a sanctimonious look entered the room.

Estelle rose at his entrance, and, after gazing at him keenly, went to the door and turned the key in the lock.

Then she turned toward her visitor, and simply said:

"You are no clergyman."

"You've struck it this time, ma'am," said he, with a light laugh. "I'm Greasy Joe, general capper and roper-in for the house that was pulled last night. I happened to be out on the fly when the cops lugged the gang. But I went to see 'em this morning, in the parson dodge, of course, and I had a little talk with Velveten George. He wants to see you."

"Of course he does," sneered the lady. "Now that he's got himself into a mess he wants me to get him out of it."

"That's the ticket, ma'am, and he says you can do it. He thinks a good deal of you, ma'am."

"Indeed, I feel highly flattered. Well, I suppose I must see him. Can I speak to him alone?"

"Not if you go in the dress you've got on. It's only parsons and sisters of charity that can talk to the prisoners. They're supposed to chin religion, you know."

"Can you procure me a disguise?"

"Yes, ma'am, if you will go along with me."

"I'll meet you at the corner in ten minutes."

"All right, ma'am."

This ended the interview, and half an hour later the keeper of the jail ushered Estelle, disguised as a sister of charity, into the cell where Velveten George was confined.

Making a reverent bow to the pretended nun, he left them alone together.

"Heaven be with you, my son," said Estelle, in a loud tone, and then being sure that they were not overheard, she approached the convict and whispered:

"Fool!"

"Thank you for the compliment," he replied, in a low tone.

"I've a good mind to let you rot in jail," continued she.

"You dare not. I know too much."

"How am I to get you out?" asked she, after a pause. "Bribe the keeper?"

"No; that might possibly do were I the only one. But Mike and Jimmy are also lugged."

"Oh, yes," sneered she, "that precious son of mine. I might have known that he'd be in the same mess with you, he always is."

"I'm proud of him," replied the father, and he meant it.

"Well, I'm not," said she, dryly; "but come, tell me what I'm to do. This interview cannot be prolonged forever."

"Here is a chart," said he, handing her a rude drawing. "It will show you the way to the hiding-place of Scar-Faced Pedro's gang, in the mountains outside of San Francisco. With the aid of the explanation therein, you'll have no trouble in finding it. Proceed there and acquaint the gang that their leader is in jail."

"Yes, I read something about that in this morning's paper. But they say he is badly wounded."

"So they thought at the time, but the doctors extracted the bullet and bandaged up his arm. He was brought here during the night and looked up in a cell. They think it's safer than if they'd send him to the hospital."

"How did you find all this out?"

"Oh, the keeper told me, never suspecting that I was one of the gang."

"Scar-Faced Pedro's?"

"Yes. I joined it the other day, and that's why I have that chart. It's against our oath to show that map to any one, but I can trust you with it. You have too much at stake to betray either me or my companions. Well, you are to tell the gang to make an assault upon the prison to-night."

"Make an assault?"

"Yes; this shebang is old and rotten. It wouldn't stand much of an attack from a hundred men, and they haven't got much of a guard here, anyway."

The keeper approaching the cell at this instant,

Estelle began to pray in a loud tone of voice, and shortly afterwards left the cell and jail.

On the outskirts of San Francisco, hidden from general view by an overhanging cliff, accessible only by certain secret passages, nestling between steep and almost perpendicular walls of rock, is a green and verdant slope or plateau, several acres in extent.

Here was a regular encampment, men, women and children, all banded together by the ties of plunder and theft.

The rogues' colony, if so it might be termed, numbered over a hundred souls, consisting of the very dregs of San Francisco society.

During the day they roamed through the streets of the city, begging, tramping, stealing, just as opportunity offered itself. At night they congregated here to divide the spoils of the day, and spend the time in riotous excesses and the drunken sleep which succeeded them.

In vain the police, and even the military, had tried to dislodge them from their stronghold.

The armed rabble, superior in position if not in numbers, obliged their invaders to retreat with heavy losses, and since recently they had been left severely alone.

Whatever authority was recognized and submitted to by the lawless mob, was that exercised by Scar-Faced Pedro and a few others of his more trusted followers.

Though usually confining their operations to minor offenses of the law, Pedro himself, and a few others, sometimes executed bolder and more ambitious deeds, and it was in such an attempt that he was wounded and imprisoned, as we have already described.

The setting sun was already throwing its last rays athwart the slope, and the men and women were in loud tones discussing among themselves the startling news which they had just received from the city, when Estelle suddenly appeared amongst them.

She still wore her sacerdotal disguise, and the gang were at a loss to account for her knowledge of the secret passage and her consequent arrival, when she said:

"Friends, I come from Scar-Faced Pedro."

At these words they all crowded around her, and listened to her in silence and with the greatest attention.

In a few words she related her mission, and then asked:

"Will you free your leader and those who are imprisoned with him?"

"We will!" cried they, as with one voice.

"Are you armed?"

"Every man amongst us," replied one of the ruffians, "has a revolver and plenty of ammunition, too."

"The prison," continued Estelle, "is situated, as you all know, probably from experience within its walls, on a hill a little outside of the city. The open country is all around it. You must go into the city in small groups to avoid attraction. At midnight you must all meet behind the rear wall, which is the one nearest to the cells, and batter it down with cross-ties, which you can get from where they are lying along the line of the railroad. The work must be done quickly and effectually. Whatever resistance you meet must be overcome. It may cost some of you your lives. Again, I ask, will you do it?"

"We will!" exclaimed the men, brandishing their weapons as if for immediate use.

It was midnight.

The sun had sunk blood-red beneath the western horizon, an ominous sign, and hardly had the night set in before the sky was overcast with heavy banks of clouds, and these shortly afterward broke and the rain descended in torrents amidst the lightning's lurid flash and the thunder's deafening crash.

A fitting night for the work in hand.

There were but few persons abroad to observe the stealthy figures as they flitted through the rain and gloom.

Within the jail all was apparently quiet and serene.

The keepers huddled together around a fire which they had built in the waiting-room, dozing over the clay pipes they were smoking.

The prisoners were silent, but alert.

In some mysterious manner almost all had obtained information of the intended attack on their bastille, and they were on the *qui vive* to do whatever they could toward aiding their friends on the outside.

In his cell sat Scar-Faced Pedro, with one arm in a sling.

Though wounded, his robust constitution had been but little weakened, and who looked like a man who, even one-armed, could stand his ground.

"Bang!" went a heavy sound, followed by the crash of trembling masonry. The keepers sprang from their stools in alarm. "What's that?" cried one. "Lightning's struck the jail!" exclaimed another. "Bang, bang!" The battering was kept up effectively. A large breach in the prison wall had been accomplished. A loud hurrah was heard from the mob without. The prisoners set up an answering shout. There was now no mistaking the sounds. "The prison is attacked!" shouted the keeper. "To the rescue, to the rescue!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A DREAM AND ITS AWAKENING.

THE president had informed Bill of the mission he had intrusted to Mac and Snooksy, and he, in turn, had imparted the information to Mary and Effie, and thus they felt no alarm at the boys' absence, though, of course, they were as yet ignorant of the exciting adventures through which the brave lads had passed.

It was toward the evening of the day on which occurred the events depicted in our last chapter, and Effie had been sent by her mother to draw a pail of water from the well which was situated at some little distance from the house.

With the pail in hand she tripped along, humming a merry song and thinking all the while of Mac, and if he would come home that night, when, just as she reached the well, she started back and uttered a quick cry of alarm.

There, seated on the small platform which surrounded the well, was an old man.

His clothes were tattered and torn, his feet were bare and sore from long travel, the hair on his uncovered head was frowsy and unkempt; his long silvery beard straggled and matted; his countenance was sunken and hollow; he looked famished and faint, and altogether his appearance was well inclined to induce the fear which sprang up in the girl's bosom at sight of him.

She would have fled from the spot had he not in a trembling voice bid her remain.

"Don't be afraid of me, sweet Miss," begged he, piteously, "I would not harm a hair of your head."

The sound of his pleading, mournful voice caused Effie's footsteps to halt, and she blushed with shame at her foolish fear.

"I was so startled, sir," murmured she, apologetically, going up to him. "You are poor and hungry; can I do anything for you?"

"A drink of water, Miss," begged he; "my throat is dry and parched."

In a moment Effie had drawn up a bucket full of the sparkling cold water, and having emptied it into her pail, took a dipper which was on a shelf attached to the well-house, and handed it to him brimful of the wholesome liquid.

The maniac, for it was no other than he, though now in one of his lucid spells, eagerly drained the vessel and handed it back to her.

"You are an angel, Miss," said he, thankfully. "I feel much refreshed now, and will continue my wanderings."

He picked up a staff which was lying at his feet, and struggled to an upright position; but the effort caused him to reel and totter, and he would have fallen had not Effie rushed to his support.

"You are weak and feeble," said she, gently. "Have you far to go?"

"Far," he repeated, vaguely. "I do not know."

"How?" asked she, somewhat surprised at this answer, "you do not know where you are going?"

"No, child. The cars brought me to this country, from whence I cannot remember. Since reaching here I have wandered many a mile, begging a crust of bread here and there, finding shelter sometimes under some hospitable roof, but oftener sleeping on the cold ground, with no covering except the dark vault of heaven. Thus I wander from place to place, seeking something for which my heart yearns, but never finding it."

"But what is it you seek?" asked she, a little curiously.

"I do not know," replied he, wearily; "perhaps it is a grave to rest my weary limbs forever." An awed silence fell on the young girl at these words.

To her youthful mind and buoyant spirits the mere mention of death aroused an almost inexpressible horror, and she gazed into the face of the old man, whom she was supporting, with an indefinable dread, as though she expected to see him sink a corpse at her feet.

"Effie, Effie!"

It was the voice of her mother calling to her from the distance; but the words themselves had a powerful effect on the old man.

"Where is she, where is she?" cried he, wildly, glancing about him with some of the old maniacal fire in his eyes. "It is she I seek. It is she I am looking for. She was the light of my home, the joy of my existence, but she left me, and I cannot find her—I cannot find her."

Tears were streaming from his eyes, and his form quivered with emotion.

"I am Effie," murmured the young girl, deeply affected by her companion's words and manner.

"You are good and beautiful," replied he, sadly, "but you are not she."

"Let me be the Effie for whom you are seeking," said she, tenderly folding her arm around his waist; "at least think that I am she, and go with me to our house; you need rest and refreshment, and mother will, I am sure, give you both."

The old man began to murmur objections, but Effie would not listen to them, and taking up the pail of water with her disengaged hand, she guided his tottering footsteps to the cottage, on the threshold of which stood her mother, anxious at her long absence, and now surprised to see her return with an aged beggar.

A few words from Effie explained all, and the old man was cordially welcomed by Mary as well as by Bill and Jack Thompson, who had arrived while Effie was at the well.

The supper table was already spread, and the family seated themselves at the table; and after they had finished, a substantial repast was given to the beggar.

The maniac—who, by the way, was not recognized by either of the men, as they had not seen him in New Jersey, and Mac had not given them any detailed description of his personal appearance—ate ravenously of the meal set before him, like one famished, and felt greatly refreshed and strengthened thereby.

The storm, which we have already described in our last chapter, now broke loose over this section of the country, and rendered it impossible for the old man to leave the house, even if his kind hosts intended him to do so, which was not the case.

"Mary," said Bill, after the supper table had been cleared, and the maniac was dozing in the large arm-chair, "I don't think either Mac or Snooksy will come home to-night, and if you haven't got any spare room for the old man, he can sleep on a mattress on the floor of the boys' room. In the morning we will see what can be done for him."

"I was just about to suggest the same thing," replied his wife.

The maniac was easily induced to change the arm-chair for the bed prepared for him by the good housewife, and without thinking to undress himself was soon sound asleep.

Bill, who had conducted him to the lads' apartment, now returned to the sitting-room where the rest were assembled, and entered into a discussion as to the probabilities of the boys succeeding in their mission.

Had he read the morning's paper he would have discovered what they had accomplished; but his stay in San Francisco that day had been but a very short while, and neither he nor Jack were great hands at reading the news.

They had thus been sitting in the room for an hour when they were agreeably surprised by the entrance of Mac and Snooksy, dripping wet.

"All heaven couldn't keep us from coming home to-night," was Mac's cheery greeting, as he and his chum divested themselves of their soaked jackets. "We were detained by the investigations and examinations and lots of other things they bothered us about, but the president gave us the permission to drive home in a special, and here we are. Do you know the news?"

"Not a syllable," replied Bill. "Is Velvetten George captured?"

"You bet, and Sear-Faced Pedro, too."

"Who's he?" asked Effie.

"I'll tell you all about it," said Mac. And then he related the various incidents with which the reader is already acquainted.

"We did the thing bully, we did," chimed in Snooksy at the conclusion of Mac's story.

The boys were congratulated upon their bravery, and then Mrs. Norton said:

"We've got a guest with us to-night, that is, a poverty-stricken old man, whom Effie met at the well and brought into the house."

"Just like her generous-hearted self," exclaimed Mac, gallantly.

"Oh, you get out," cried Effie; but she blushed with gratification nevertheless.

"We did not think you would come home," continued Mary, "and so I made him a bed on the floor in your room. He is sleeping there now, and I don't like to wake the poor old man."

"Oh, never mind, mother," cheerily replied Mac, "we'd just as lief have him sleep in the same room with us as not, and we're that much tired out that we'll sleep as soundly as a pair of rats, won't we, Snooksy?"

"You bet we will."

And so it was arranged. The boys being thoroughly exhausted by their day's labor, soon bade the family good-night and retired to their room. They had a bit of tallow candle with them, which shed only a dim and flickering light, and as the maniac had thrown his coverlet partially over his head, they could not well discern his features in the cursory glance they gave him.

They were soon in bed sound asleep, and Mac off in the land of dreams, fancying himself again on his old locomotive in New Jersey, and again having a desperate struggle with the maniac. In his dream he thought the crazy man had thrown him on the floor of the cab, and kneeling with one knee on his breast, was winding his long, bony fingers around his throat and choking him. The sensation seemed so real that he began to gasp and gurgle, and finally opening his eyes beheld to his horror that it was not all a dream.

The storm, which had been raging furiously when he went to bed, had died away, and the full moon shining through the window threw a weird and ghastly light on the livid face of the maniac, now again in a delirium of fury. The lunatic had one knee pressed on the boy's chest, while his fingers were clutched around the lad's throat with a vise-like grasp.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A DOUBLE ABDUCTION.

By the time the keepers of the jail awoke to a realization of their position, a sufficiently large hole had been made in the prison wall to permit the entrance of the attacking party.

In they swarmed, shouting, howling and cursing, brandishing their knives and pistols, and thoroughly frightening the already greatly demoralized guard.

A few pistol shots were fired by both sides, without, however, doing much damage, and the keepers soon found themselves lying bound and gagged in the guard-room, with the door locked and bolted on them.

The rabble had possessed itself of the keys to the cells and outer door of the prison, and in a very short time all the prisoners were set at liberty.

The crowd now dispersed as rapidly as it had assembled, leaving the place dismantled, the cells empty, and the keepers caged.

Estelle Mowbray had accompanied the assailants to the jail, though she waited at some distance until she was joined by Velvetten George, Jimmy, and Red-Handed Mike upon their release.

They separated themselves from the gang, and having reached a secluded spot where they were both concealed from observation and sheltered from the storm, which was still raging, though not so violently as before, Velvetten George asked:

"What time is it?"

"Near midnight," replied Estelle.

"I wonder whether I could get to the depot in time to catch the midnight train for Los Angeles."

"The Branch Road?"

"No; the opposition line."

"Why?"

"For two reasons. One is to put myself into communication with Sam Slocum, the president, who resides in Los Angeles, and the other to lay for that devil, Mac."

"But won't you be detected on the cars?"

"Hardly. There'll be but few passengers, and we'll keep shady."

"And Mr. Slocum, won't he deliver you up to the law?"

"He?" laughed the convict. "I'll tell you a secret," lowering his voice. "It was he who put me up to place obstructions across the track of the Branch Road. He didn't know that that just suited my own little game, and paid me handsomely for it. He's terribly jealous of the other road, and especially envies them the possession of the boy engineer. He'd give anything to know that the brat was dead. But come on, we'll miss the train if we stand talking here."

"Do you want us to go along, dad?" asked Jimmy.

"Of course; you and Mike. And you, Estelle, now that you've got the chart for Pedro's flat, meet me there in a day or two. If I capture Mac,

"I'll bring him there and await your coming to see him before I send him to kingdom come. By the way, have you got any rocks? I'm busted, as usual."

"Money, always money," grumbled she, handing him her purse. "I wish this cursed business was over."

After a few more words the precious pair parted company, Estelle proceeding to the house of Greasy Joe, where she donned her own habiliments, and remained until morning before returning to her hotel, the convict, his son and Mike, hastening to the depot, too late, indeed, to catch the regular train, but in time to see the superintendent.

her clothes, was about to rush up-stairs, when a huge volume of smoke drove her back.

"My God!" shrieked she, "the house is on fire, and they are all up-stairs, and Effie is asleep in her room on the top floor! They will all be burnt to death!"

Through the blinding smoke there came rushing down the stairs at this moment the Spanish servant. She slept in a room next to Effie's.

"Where is Effie?" cried the mother.

"Has she not come down?" gasped the servant.

"No."

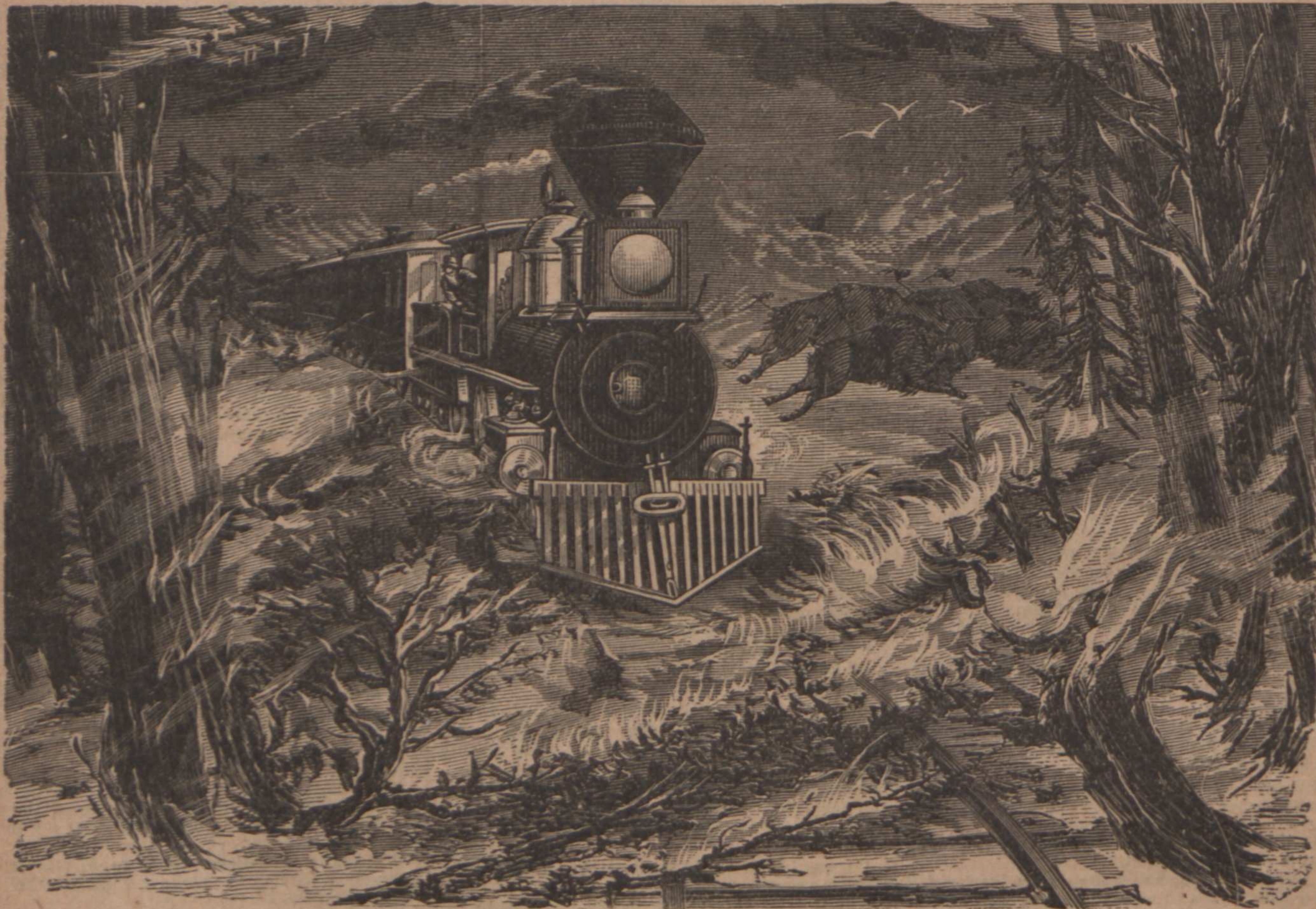
"Then she must be still in her room. I was too frightened to think of going to her."

pearance of the two boys, that they did not notice the maniac awake from his state of insensibility, arise cautiously to his feet, and after cunningly gazing about him, steal softly over to where Effie was lying, raise her in his arms, and disappear with her into the woods.

The boys, with their clothes and hair somewhat singed, and their hands and faces blackened with soot and smoke, but having fortunately sustained no bodily injuries, now came rushing out of the burning building.

"Thank goodness," cried Mac, as he shook hands with his foster-mother, "that we were in time to save Effie's life. A minute later, and—"

He was interrupted by a wild cry from Bill.



LITTLE MAC.—The seething, hissing lurid tongues seem licking the cars on all sides, the train has caught on fire in several places.

He, knowing the relations existing between the ex-convict and the president of the road, placed a locomotive at their disposal, and, as Mike knew how to run it, the precious trio were soon speeding at a dashing rate toward Los Angeles.

"Ah, ha!" screamed the maniac, "again I clutch you. Now your face will no longer mock me! You shall die—die!"

Mac caught hold of his assailant's wrists and sought to tear the cruel fingers from his throat. He also managed to utter a gasping cry, which awoke Snooksy.

The latter, comprehending with a glance the danger of his chum, threw himself on the lunatic, and soon all three were rolling in a desperate struggle on the floor.

The noise and cries aroused Bill and Jack from their slumbers, and recognizing that it came from the boys' room, they rushed thither, but partly dressed, with revolvers in one hand and lighted tallow candles in the other.

The door was locked, but giving it a combined push, they burst it open so suddenly that they toppled headlong into the room, tumbling over the struggling trio on the floor, and, to make matters worse, setting fire to the straw mattress on which the maniac had slept.

A scene of confusion worse confounded now ensued. There were five now on the floor, kicking and shouting, all interlocked in each other's embraces, and unable to check the flames, which, having communicated themselves, by means of the mosquito netting, to the bed, and thence to the curtains before the windows, were now rapidly gaining an alarming headway.

In the room below Mrs. Norton had arisen at the same time as her husband, and having donned

With a wild cry of anguish, the mother was about to rush up the stairs in spite of flame and smoke, when Bill and Jack came hurrying down, bearing the insensible form of the maniac between them.

"Where are the boys?" cried Mary, as she and the servant followed the men out of the burning building into the open air.

"They've gone up after Effie," replied Bill, as he and Jack placed their burden on the ground. "This is a bad business. This old man is the same lunatic who once before came near killing Mac. We had to knock him senseless to get him out of the burning room."

"Did he set the house on fire?"

"No; that was my own and Jack's cursed luck. Ah, there are the boys now, with Effie."

He directed his wife's attention to the window near the roof of the cottage, which looked out from the young girl's room.

At this window Mac and Snooksy had appeared, bearing in their arms the unconscious form of Effie, who, it seems, had fainted away in dead fright.

"Catch her, father," cried Mac.

"Ready," exclaimed Bill, as he and Jack stood under the window with their arms outstretched.

Holding the girl for a moment suspended in the air, Mac let her drop. Both her father and Jack caught her, and laid her uninjured on the ground.

"Now, boys," cried Bill, "how will you get down?"

"Oh, we'll risk a run down the stairs," cheerily cried Mac, and the next minute he and Snooksy had disappeared from the window.

They all were so absorbed gazing at the burning building and anxiously awaiting the reap-

"Gone, gone!" shrieked the father, pointing in anguish to the spot where but a moment ago he had placed his unconscious child.

"Effie gone!" exclaimed all in concert, "impossible!"

"It's true," said Jack, "and the maniac's van-moosed, too."

"I see it all!" fairly shrieked Mac. "He has stolen off with Effie!"

"He could not have gone far. He must be lurking in the woods near about. We must hunt him up."

Leaving the once pretty cottage to burn to the ground, they all, even Mary and the servant included, spread out into the woods in chase of the maniac.

As usual, Mac and Snooksy kept well together, and in their eagerness to regain possession of their loved companion, far outstripped the others in the hunt.

All this while there had been three spectators of this scene who had kept themselves concealed in the woods, but noted everything.

These were Velveteen George, Jimmy and Mike. They had seen the glare of the conflagration as they were speeding by with their locomotive, and had halted the engine to reconnoiter the scene.

Had they been the arbiters of fate they could not have arranged the incidents that were taking place more suitable to their nefarious designs.

"Now is our time," whispered the convict. "After them—capture the brats and bring them on the locomotive. Then back to 'Frisco and thence to Pedro's flat. Follow me."

Mac and Snooksy must have thought lightning struck them when they suddenly received, each of them, a stunning blow on the back of the head

and before they could even cry out, they found themselves thrown into the cab of an engine, which almost immediately thereafter was speeding at a terrific rate along the rails.

Neither the capturers nor captured, however, were aware of the fact that the maniac was clinging to the cow-catcher with one hand, while with the other he held Effie's form pressed convulsively to his breast.

CHAPTER XIX.

A STRANGE CONFESSION.

ON dashed the locomotive at a terrible rate. How the maniac managed to maintain his hold on the cow-catcher, and not only prevent himself from being thrown off and killed, but also to keep his unconscious victim safe in his grasp, are miracles utterly impossible to sane minds, but frequently performed by those whose reason has forever fled.

Within the cab Red-Handed Mike, who had in former days been an engineer himself, showed his perfect familiarity with all parts of the engine by keeping up the high rate of speed without bursting the boiler. Jimmy did good service as fireman, while Velvetreen George, with some ropes that he found in the cab, effectually bound the boys hand and foot.

It was already broad daylight when they reached the woods on the outskirts of San Francisco, and which were but a stone's throw from the secret entrance to Pedro's flat.

"Halt the engine here," ordered Velvetreen George. "We'll get out here and carry the brats to the flat."

"And leave the locomotive on the track?" asked Mike, as he shut off the steam.

"Yes; let the duffers find it and take it to Frisco. Come, Jimmy, we'll have to git before we're seen. Mike, you take Snooksy, and I'll take Mac. It's lucky that the kids ain't got over that knock on the head we gave 'em; it saves us some trouble."

The two men each grasped one of the unconscious lads, and flinging them over their shoulders, like a package of goods, descended from the cab with Jimmy.

It might be supposed that they would at once discover the presence of the maniac and Effie on the cow-catcher, but such was not the fact, for the reason simply that the latter was no longer there.

As soon as the locomotive began to slacken its speed, and even before it had entirely halted, the lunatic had jumped off, and with Effie in his arms, had disappeared in the woods.

About an hour later, the precious trio arrived with their victims at the flat, and were received with tumultuous applause by the ruffianly gang there assembled.

Placing the boys in one of the huts, and bidding Mike and Jimmy to restore them to consciousness, but, at the same time, to give them no chance to escape, Velvetreen George proceeded to the more ambitious residence of the chief, Scar-Faced Pedro.

He found the latter in conversation with a man, who, although disguised to his business acquaintances, he easily recognized as Sam Slocum, the president of the opposition road.

"Hello, Sam," exclaimed he familiarly, "you here? I thought you were in Los Angeles."

"No, George," replied the other. "I remained in San Francisco last night on some business, and came here this morning thinking to meet you here. If Pedro will excuse us I have a little private matter which I wish to talk over with you."

"All right, gents," declared the Mexican, arising. "I'll leave yez together, and if yer want any fine old Bourbon you'll find the bottle in the closet there."

Thus saying, he sauntered out of the room, leaving the plotters together.

Velvetreen George got the bottle and a couple of glasses and placed them on the table, while his companion carefully closed and locked the door, and then examined the windows, nooks and corners, and even poked his cane up the fireless chimney to make sure that there was no one near to overhear them.

"I guess we're alone," said he, resuming his seat, apparently satisfied with his investigation.

Had he, however, looked up the chimney he would have beheld therein the form of a man, who had been alone in the room before his coming, and who, seeing him approach with Pedro, and recognizing him, had, with a half-muttered oath, concealed himself in his present hiding-place, where he could overhear every word that was being uttered.

"Well," exclaimed Slocum, raising the glass which the convict had filled for him, "here's luck. And now," continued he, after they had drained their glasses, "to business."

"It's a pretty long time," began he musingly,

as if recalling the memory of the past, "since we two were members of the same gang out in California here."

"Yes," said the other, "nigh on thirteen years."

"I was a reckless, devel-may-care young fellow then, and my father, despairing of ever reclaiming me, made a will, leaving all his fortune to my sister, with the mere proviso that should she die without heirs it was then to go to me. My father died soon after that, and my sister fell in love with and married a young miner named William Raymond, who had come out from the States some years previous to seek his fortunes in the diggings."

"Say, Sam," interrupted the convict, "I can see about what you're driving at; but it's long talking between drinks."

"Well, fill up then."

The men took another draught of the ardent liquor, and then Slocum continued:

"You can imagine how mad I was when I heard of this marriage, and my heart was filled with bitter hatred both against my sister and brother-in-law. But I had my revenge. I learned that my sister, ashamed of my ill-doings, had kept the knowledge that she had a brother a secret from her husband. That gave me the clew to my actions. I visited her by stealth, and took care to circulate the rumor that she held private meetings with a stranger. I wanted to arouse his jealousy, to drive him to some act that would separate them forever. For a time my efforts were in vain, but after her child was born, and my anonymous letters to him grew more and more impudent, his pent up fury broke loose. He surprised us at an interview the time and place of which I had communicated to him. He was beside himself with rage and indignation, and with cocked pistol rushed upon us. I threw myself into his arms, and a desperate struggle for life and death ensued, in the midst of which I pulled the trigger of his weapon. A report followed, and, with a piercing shriek, my sister, shot through the heart, fell lifeless to the ground."

He paused and drank down another glass of brandy at one gulp, while his listener, wicked and crime-stained as he was, could not repress a shudder at hearing this man so coolly confess himself to be a murderer, and of his own sister.

"Did this Raymond," he ventured to ask, "believe that he had killed his wife?"

"He did," replied Slocum, "and you can bet I strengthened him in that belief. I told him of the relation I held to the dead woman, and with apparent liberality, promised to keep silent about the affair and allow him to escape. He fled, and from that day to this I have never again beheld him."

There was certainly the sound of a groan at this juncture, in the chimney, but the men were too absorbed in the terrible tale to hear it.

"At the coroner's inquest, which was subsequently held, I gave a plausible version of the affair, and, luckily for me, this was unexpectedly corroborated by one of the servants who had witnessed the scene, but not near enough to determine who had fired the shot. I got off scot-free, while warrants were issued for the apprehension of my brother-in-law for murder. But they never amounted to anything, as the authorities could not find him."

"And you do not know whether he is still alive to-day?"

"I do not. At any rate he was dead to the world, my sister was dead in fact, and nothing remained to keep my father's property from my possession but a weak, puny infant, their child."

"And that child you brought to me, with instructions to bring him up as a thief and vagabond."

"Exactly. I might have had him put to death, but somehow I didn't quite fancy burdening my soul with any more stains of blood than were already there. All that was thirteen years ago. I had intended to ask you the last time we met what had become of him, but you know our interview was abruptly broken into. I ask you now, does he live?"

"He does."

Again that rustle in the chimney became evident, and this time even the villains heard it.

"Hark!" cried Slocum, starting up; "what was that?"

"Rats up the chimney, I believe."

"I'll smoke them out, then."

The self-confessed murderer gathered up a pile of dried leaves and chips of wood, which were lying beside the hearth, and having heaped them into a pile under the chimney, applied a lighted match to the mass.

"If ther's anybody up there," said he, resuming his seat, "he'll soon yell to be put out. You say the brat lives. Where is he?"

"I've got him cooped up in a hut here along with another youngster. I brought him up as a

little snakesman, and for a time he was turning out all right; but then he fell in with Little Mac and became converted. The young rascal ain't fit to live any more."

"He must die," said Slocum, in low, but deliberate tones. "On the wealth which belongs to him I have prospered and grown rich. I will not surrender it up now."

"No more you need to. The brats have clipped Pedro in the arm and shoulder the other night, and for that they'll be tried to-day according to the law of the flat. They'll be sentenced to death, and at sunrise to-morrow will be shot. Come along. I'll show you the young galoots."

The precious pair left the room, and hardly had they done so, when down the burning chimney came the man who had been hiding there.

He was almost suffocated with smoke, and his clothes were on fire in several places.

He, however, managed to extinguish the flames with his hands, and sinking on his knees raised his eyes towards the ceiling in fervent emotion.

"Thank Heaven," cried he, "my expiation is over. The haunted murderer, the outcast, the forced companion of burglars and thieves, can at last meet his fellow-men face to face, conscious of his innocence. But my son, my William, is still in danger. Heaven grant me the power to rescue him and his companion from the dreaded fate that awaits them."

As we gaze into the upturned, tear-stained face we recognize the mysterious burglar who, it will be remembered, had, with Scar-Faced Pedro, feloniously entered Mr. Johnson's residence, and had so precipitately fled from it on beholding Snooksy.

CHAPTER XX.

ON THE TRACK.

It would be a vain effort to attempt to depict the surprise, grief and sorrow of the so lately happy family at the disappearance not only of the maniac with Effie, but also the most mysterious one of Mac and Snooksy.

The loss of their home and all their property, considerable in itself, was swallowed up and forgotten in the new and more terrible calamity which had befallen them.

All the remainder of the night they roamed through the forests alternately calling on the girl and boys by name, but all in vain.

No answering shout came to their anguished cries save the mocking echo of their own voices.

Daybreak found them in Los Angeles, and with despairing hearts they got on board the train which it was Bill's and Jack's duty to run to San Francisco. Arrived at the metropolis, and luckily meeting Mr. Johnson, the president, at the depot, they confided their sad story to him.

"No matter about the burning of the cottage," said he, cheerfully. "I'll build another one, and as for the loss of your household property, I'll make that good. The main thing is to find the boys and Effie. Jack and Bill, you are released from further duty to-day. Come with me at once to the chief of police; we must consult with him about what is to be done."

"I must go with you, too," exclaimed Mrs. Norton. "I must learn the worst. This suspense about Effie's and the boys' fate is killing me."

The Spanish servant affirmed the same thing, for she had grown deeply attached to her young mistress, and accordingly the whole party proceeded immediately to the headquarters of the police.

The superintendent, who was a keen, far-seeing man, listened patiently to the tale related rather incoherently to him, and then said:

"There are two theories in the case. The one is that the boys have struck the trail of the maniac and the girl, and are following it up; the other and the more probable one is that the disappearance of the boys, at least, is connected with the daring attack on the jail which occurred last night."

"Yes," interrupted Mr. Johnson, "I read about it in the papers this morning. The gang of the rascally burglar who had feloniously entered my premises broke into the prison, and, overcoming the keepers, released all the prisoners."

"Exactly," said the superintendent. "And I have information on which to base the belief that last night Velvetreen George and two of his confederates obtained possession of a locomotive and drove off towards Los Angeles. That locomotive was discovered by some of my men this morning standing deserted and abandoned on the rails. It is more than likely that these villains were in the neighborhood of the burning cottage, and kidnapped the boys."

"But Effie, my daughter, and the maniac?" cried Mrs. Norton.

"They may or may not be with these ruffians. That is something I cannot tell."

"Supposing your theory correct," asked Bill, anxiously, "what do you think the rascals have done with the boys?"

"They have very likely brought them to Pedro's flat, and, if they have, I fear they are lost."

"Why lost?" inquired Jack Thompson.

"Because the place is utterly inaccessible to the police or the militia. A half a dozen of the rogues would keep a whole army at bay, unless—"

"Unless what?" asked Mr. Johnson.

"One of the gang would betray the secret passage, and that has not and, I fear, never will be done."

An officer here interrupted the consultation with the announcement that a man wished to speak with the superintendent.

"I am very busy now," said the latter, "and cannot be disturbed. Tell him to call again."

"But he says his business is very important," rejoined the officer, "and requires immediate attention. He comes from Pedro's flat."

The last words acted like a charm.

"Pedro's flat!" cried the superintendent; "send him up at once."

A moment later, and the same man, who a few hours before had been an unseen listener of the conversation between Velvet George and Slocum, entered the private office, pale, breathless, with disheveled hair, and still in his singed and tattered garments, and throwing himself at the feet of the surprised superintendent, exclaimed:

"I surrender myself to justice!"

The chief of police eyed him for a moment, and then springing to his feet, cried:

"William Raymond!"

"I am he," replied the man.

"The murderer of your wife!"

All present in the room shrank from the kneeling man at these words.

"No," cried Raymond, arising and glancing proudly and straightforwardly at the superintendent. "I am innocent, and I can prove it."

"You can?"

"Yes."

He rapidly related the substance of the interview he had overheard, and also the fate which awaited the heroic lads.

"I would be happy, indeed," said the superintendent, after he had finished, "to be convinced that you have spoken the truth."

"I always believed that Sam Slocum was a scoundrel," exclaimed Mr. Johnson, "but I never thought him to be such a deep-dyed villain as this."

"You have been an outlaw since this murder took place," said the chief.

"I have," admitted Raymond.

"A member of Pedro's gang, and a sharer in their acts of violence and lawlessness."

"No," cried he. "Under the plea that my life was in danger if I ventured out of the flat, I remained there for thirteen years doing the drudgery work of the gang, and guarding the place during their absence. It was not until the night before last that, unable longer to maintain my pretense, Pedro obliged me to join him in a burglarious attempt on the house of Mr. Johnson, that gentleman there. I swear it, that was the first time in my life that I attempted an unlawful act, and I was restrained from accomplishing it by suddenly and unexpectedly seeing and recognizing my own son."

"Ah, I remember," exclaimed the railroad president. "You were the burglar who fled so precipitately. And you say that Snooksy is your son?"

"If by that name you mean the boy whose bosom I bared and on it found the birth-mark, I answer truthfully, yes. He is my son, William Raymond."

"And," asked Bill, who had thus far remained silent, "you say that he and Mac are in Pedro's flat?"

"Yes. After I had learned of their capture and the relation which one of them bore to me, I unobserved left the flat and have hastened here to implore the aid of the police to effect their rescue."

"We are here for the same purpose," said Bill. "I and my wife are, so to say, the foster-parents of both the boys, and we love them as much as we love our own child."

"Ah, that reminds me," interrupted Mary. "Did you see anything of a maniac, an old gray-haired man, and a young girl of fifteen in the flat?"

"I did not," replied Raymond.

"Oh," ejaculated the unhappy mother, "what can have become of them?"

"Be calm, Mary," said her husband. "You see we are already on the track of the boys, and, with Heaven's help, we'll soon discover our own sweet child."

"William Raymond," said the superintendent, sternly, "you will for the present consider your-

self a prisoner. I will, however, so far credit your story as to put a detachment of police in your charge. You are to lead them through the secret passage into the flat. They will be under orders to shoot you down at the first sign of treachery on your part. Do you understand the terms?"

"I do, and it is all I ask. My fidelity shall be proven to you by the rescue of the lads and the capture of the real murderer of my sainted wife. I cannot, however, introduce the police into the flat during the daytime. We would surely be discovered. An hour before the dawn is the most favorable time. Have the force ready, and I will lead them."

"And we will accompany you," cry the others in concert.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE TRIAL AND SENTENCE.

"HELLO, mammy! how d'yer feel?"

Estelle Mowbray glanced up from the afternoon paper, in which she was reading a detailed account of the attack on the jail, and beheld standing before her the funniest-looking specimen of a negro boy that she had ever laid eyes on.

"You little black rascal!" cried she, "how dare you intrude in my private room and address me in that familiar style?"

"What," exclaimed the young scamp, "don't yer know yer own lovely kid—yer sweet, precious Jimmy? Oh, Lor', has it come to this, that me own mammy don't know me 'cause I've rubbed some lampblack on my phiz?"

"So it's you, Jimmy, is it?" said she, not particularly elated with the discovery.

"The Twister, you bet."

"And why do you come here in this disguise?"

"To keep from being nabbed by the cops, in course; dere on der lookout for me and dad, but, Lor' bless your soul, I passed right under dere noses an' dey didn't know me from a genuine nig. Dem is fly cops; dey orter be in New York. Oh, yes, I guess so. Just der cheese for der boys."

"Well, now that you're here," inquired she, rather impatiently, "what do you want?"

"A little whisky straight an' a cigar—Havana, if yer've got dem."

"Come, come, don't fool with me; what's your errand?"

"Oh, dad's sent me here for ter tell yer ter come right over ter ther flat ter see the circus."

"Circus!"

"Yes; we've nabbed Little Mac an' Snooksy, an' we're goin' ter try 'em by sundown. So there's just time for you ter get over there."

"So you've captured him at last? See to it that he don't slip through your fingers again."

"Oh, we've got him dead sure this time. Der both of 'em'll be condemned ter death an' shot ter-morrow afore 'daylight, an' dad says that he wants yer to come over an' look at the kid afore they settle his hash, so that yer kin see for yerself that he's the right one. So, ole lady, jist put on yer duds an' tramp along wid me."

"With you!" sneered she. "I wouldn't be seen beside you in the street, even if you were not in this miserable disguise."

"Yer hard on me, mammy," replied Jimmy, spiritedly. "No one not aknowin' it would guess that you were me mother. No matter, dad an' me's got along widout you afore, an' I guess we kin do it again. We're wicked, we are, but we ain't hypercrits like you are."

"There, that will do. You go ahead and tell your father I'll be at the flat by six o'clock."

"All right, mammy. Say, ain't yer got a snifter ter give a feller afore he goes?"

"I don't understand your slang."

"Oh, of course not," sneered Jimmy; "yer too high-toned. But yer got a black heart, and though yer are me mother, I hate yer, I do, an' I ain't afraid ter tell yer neither."

Shaking his fist at her, he rushed out of the room in time to avoid being struck by a book which the angry woman flung after him.

"So he hates me, does he?" hissed she when she was alone. "Well, I return that passion a hundred fold. I hate him and his father. Their existence links me to the life I would fain forget. It is only after their death that I can with perfect safety assume again my station in society in New York. As long as the true heir to all my wealth lives, I dare not put them out of the way; but he, once dead, they, too, shall follow him to the grave."

Opening a secret drawer of her desk, she took therefrom the vial of poison which we have already described in a former chapter.

"This," muttered she, gazing at the colorless liquid, "will forever relieve me of my husband and my son. Strange, that I should be able to thus calmly contemplate their murder. But, bah! with Velvet George's death I rid the world of

a venomous reptile, and his brat is but an egg, which, if not destroyed, will hatch out a similar monster. I do mankind a service, and, as for myself, I have no conscience to trouble me, and if it comes to the worst, a few drops of this will also settle my fate."

She hid the vial in her bosom, and wrapped a long dark mantle around her, which effectually concealed her form.

"I will satisfy myself by ocular proof," continued she, speaking to herself, while engaged in completing her toilet, "that the boy on whose track Velvet George has been for the last two months is really the one I fear, and that his doom is irrevocably sealed. Then, during the general rioting which will no doubt take place to-night, I will find the means of administering to the two beings I hate and dread such a quantity of these fatal drops as to bring about their death to-morrow morning, when I shall be again on my way to New York."

It is almost terrible to contemplate the utter heartlessness and perfect deliberateness with which this woman-fiend laid out her plan of action. It is well for mankind and the world that in real life such instances of total depravity are exceedingly rare; that they exist, however, is a sad and melancholy truth evidenced by a poisoning trial now actually taking place in England.

Throwing the hood of her mantle over her head, she issued from the room and house.

Little did she imagine that she would never again return to them alive.

The setting sun was throwing its last rays through the paneless windows into the hut where Mac and Snooksy were imprisoned. They had, indeed, been restored to consciousness, but their hands and feet were still firmly bound.

"Say, Mac," asked Snooksy, disconsolately, "what do you think they're going to do to us?"

"Kill us, I suppose," replied Mac, gloomily.

"It's rather hard on us, ain't it?" continued the former. "We've been in tough scrapes before, and got out of them, but it seems as if luck's turned against us. I'm afraid we're in for it this time."

"I ain't afraid of death," exclaimed the boy engineer, resolutely. "I've faced it many a time before. It's thinking of mother and father, of Jack and—of Effie what knocks me."

A tear, which, by reason of his hands being tied, he was unable to brush away, coursed slowly down his cheek.

"Hello, yer cryin', are yer? So, yer proud spirit's been broken at last. Well, it's about time. I say, Snooksy, why don't yer snivel too, yer his pal, yer know, curse yer!"

It was Jimmy, who had just entered the hut and made these unfeeling remarks. By way of emphasizing his words he gave Snooksy, who was lying bound and helpless on the floor, a kick in the ribs.

"Oh, if I could only lay my hands on you," cried the ill-treated lad.

"But yer can't," taunted the young imp of Satan, giving him another kick: "'cause why, yer hands are tied. But no matter, yer won't want 'em much longer, nor anything else for the matter of that. I've been sent here by the lord high cockolorum, which is Scar-Faced Pedro, for ter summon the two of yez to his court."

"A court?" inquired Mac, with interest.

"Yes, an' a bang-up one, too, an' don't yer forget it. Ole Pedro's judge, an' dad an' me's on the jury. Say, don't yer want ter see me?"

He held out his hand in a most tantalizing manner, while he screwed up his face and winked his eye in a way most laughable to behold.

In spite of their melancholy position, Mac and Snooksy could not for the life of them refrain from laughing aloud.

"Oh, yes, in a good humor, are yer," grimly exclaimed Jimmy. "I guess you won't find it much of a laughing matter when yer stand up afore the bar, by which I don't mean a drinkin' bar, neither."

He chuckled at his own funny conceit, and then having summoned two men into the hut, said:

"See here, these chaps refuse to go to court, which it would be contempt of court, only they can't walk, seein' that their feet are tied. Now, you fellers, jist hist 'em over your shoulders an' follow me."

The boys made no resistance; it would have been utterly futile if they had; and besides, this talk about a court had awakened their curiosity, and they were bodily carried into the room where the ex-convict had had his interview with Sam Slocum.

At the table, which had been shifted to one corner, sat the leader of the outlaws, with a look of grim dignity on his ugly and scarred visage.

At his right hand sat Sam Slocum, who had determined to remain with the gang until he had witnessed with his own eyes the execution of his

nephew; at his left hand sat Estelle, who had shortly before arrived at the flat. A number of ruffians, including Velveteen George, were grouped around the room.

The bonds were removed from the prisoners' legs so that they could stand upright, and then the veriest farce of a judicial trial was solemnly enacted.

After the mock jury had brought in a verdict, Sear-Faced Pedro arose in his seat and thus addressed the boys:

"Young fellers, the jury have found yer guilty, an' the court, which is me, is agoin' ter pass sentence on yer. It is that yer be lugged back ter yer prison an' kept there until sunrise ter-morrer, when yer ter be taken out an' shot, and may the devil fly away wid yer souls."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

To say that the lads received their death sentence with all the fortitude of Roman heroes would, doubtlessly, be highly flattering to their moral courage, but, unfortunately, it would not be the truth.

Unlike the majority of story-book heroes, they were greatly alarmed at the fate to which they had been doomed, and broke out in loud and tearful lamentations for mercy.

But that was an unknown quality in the breasts of their captors, and the boys were carried, shrieking and struggling, back to the hut which constituted their prison.

This unpleasant duty over, the outlaws determined to spend the approaching night in wild revelry and bacchanalian carousals.

Both Sam Slocum and Estelle Mowbray—who, by the way, had been introduced to each other, and on the principle of "birds of a feather flock together," had become fast friends—determined to join the general orgie, and remain with the outlaws over night.

The apology of a supper was spread in the apartment which had just now acted as a court-room, and this being hastily dispatched, whisky, wine and cigars were produced, and all present gave themselves up to a jolly good spree.

As the night wore on the fun became fast and furious, and the condemned lads, spending the hours which still remained to them in bitter contemplation of what the morrow would bring forth, could not help hearing the drunken shouts, the maudlin laughter and occasional snatches of coarse, ribald song.

"I wonder," muttered Snooksy, "if that's the way of the world. There's the lot of 'em, every one of whom is fit to be hung, feasting and merry-making; and here are we, who strive to be good and do good, going to be shot down like dogs!"

"It's rough on us, I know," replied Mac, "and if we weren't bound here hand and foot, we might make a strike for liberty. As it is, I guess our goose is cooked; but mark my words, Snooksy, every man of them, and the woman, too—for she's as bad as the rest—will come to a bad end. The good Father in heaven won't allow this double murder to be perpetrated without making these villains suffer for it."

Never before had their situation appeared so hopeless to the boys, and their first paroxysm of fear and indignation having subsided, they spent the night in consoling each other, and trying to school themselves to meet their fate like men.

At midnight all the sisters, with the exception of Estelle, who, though she had shouted, laughed and sang the loudest, had confined herself entirely to wine, and drank but little of that, were too drunk to know what they themselves or anybody else were doing.

Velveteen George was sitting beside her, with his arm around her waist, making love to her with all his old-time ardor, while Jimmy, apparently oblivious of the defiant words he had hurled at her that afternoon, was reclining in her lap in a semi-stupefied state.

"Now is my time," thought she, and placing her handkerchief to her bosom she skillfully drew forth a tiny vial and concealed it within its folds.

Next, releasing herself from her husband's embrace, she raised a glass full of wine in one hand, and then, as if by accident, dropped the handkerchief to the floor.

The vial, wrapped up in its folds, neither broke nor gave forth any sound.

Still holding the glass in her hand, she stooped under the table, and there, with the rapidity of lightning, poured some drops of the poison into the wine, and then replaced the vial in her bosom.

"George," said she, after she had arisen from her stooping position, "to-morrow you and Jimmy and I will together go far away from here.

You will give up your old associations and begin life anew. I will devote myself to the education of my child. We will make a real happy family together."

"Zat we will, my dear," cried he in thick, hardly intelligible utterances.

"And let us pledge our future welfare in this glass of wine."

"I never—hic—drink wine, Estelle. Make it—hic—brandy, my dear."

"Oh, no. You know I never touch that. We will all drink out of this glass, each one-third. That is the pledge."

"All right, my dear," hiccupped he, taking the proffered glass, "anything to oblige."

He drained the goblet one-third and then handed it back to her.

"Now it's Jimmy's turn," said she.

The boy was almost asleep, but she managed to pour the remainder of the wine down his throat, which he mechanically swallowed, and almost immediately thereafter went sound asleep.

"I declare!" exclaimed she, in a tone of mock dismay, "the little greedy-gut has emptied the glass. No matter, I'll pledge my faith in this glass."

She took up another glass of wine and drank it.

"It is accomplished," muttered she beneath her breath, as she sat the empty glass on the table; "a few hours more, and I will be freed from the three beings on earth whom I hate."

The carousals continued until one by one the parties thereto sank into drunken sleep, some lying with their heads on the table, but the majority were stretched at full length on the floor.

Even Estelle fell into a gentle doze.

At daybreak some outlaws, who were not of sufficient high degree to participate in the orgie, entered the room and found all the inmates sound asleep.

"This is a pretty go," exclaimed one of them. "There's them kids to be shot, and here's the heads of the gang all dead drunk. It's mighty lucky that the cops don't know the secret entrance, for if they had surprised us now they'd have a mighty easy thing ter get away with us."

Sundry sound shakings and rubbings were needed to arouse the drunken party, and it was only after they had literally soaked their heads in the water of the limpid stream which flowed through the flat, that they were sufficiently sobered to set to work at the duty of the hour.

"Let them brats be brought to the plateau," ordered Pedro, "an' have the Hangman's Brigade drawn up. We'll be there directly."

"Is the hangman's brigade the fellers what pops at 'em wid dere muskets?" inquired Jimmy.

"Yes," replied the leader. "We've got six men whose duty it is ter act as executioners. An' their places ain't sinecures neither. Only a month ago we shot a member of the gang 'cause we thort he was goin' ter give us away."

"Count me in as one of them," exclaimed Jimmy.

"You?" asked Pedro, surprised at this request.

"You bet. I'm goin' ter have a crack at 'em; an' I'm a bang-up shot, too. Kin hit the bull's-eye every time. Oh, jimminy, won't I plug 'em!"

"If your dad's willin' that you should have a hand in the game," said the leader of the outlaws, "I'll put yer inter the brigade."

"Oh, yes," rejoined Velveteen George, "let the boy have his sport."

Jimmy having gained his point, hastened ahead to the hut, where the doomed lads had first received notice that the hour of their death had arrived.

"We've got to submit," Mac was saying to the ruffians who had come to lead them to the place of execution, "and we ain't afraid to die; but as sure as there's a heaven above us, God will avenge us and punish you for this wicked act."

"That's just the way I believe," added Snooksy.

"Oh, cheese it, both of yer," cried Jimmy. "We'll blow yez inter the middle of next week and look out for the consequences ourselves!"

"Boy as you are," exclaimed Mac, "you're the wickedest monster that was ever created!"

"Dry up!" retorted the young scamp, advancing threateningly, "or I'll put a head on yer now."

"You're a coward, that's what you are," continued the boy engineer, not at all intimidated by the threat; "and if we had our hands loose, we'd soon make you sing in a different tune."

"Aye, that we would," chimed in Snooksy. "We'd show you who'd have a head put on him."

Jimmy wasted no more words on the lads, but ordered the men to carry them to the plateau.

The boys, bound as they were, were slung across the shoulders of the brawny ruffians and borne to what was to be the scene of their death, like lambs to the slaughter.

This plateau or level was an open piece of

ground hedged in on all sides, except the one leading to the flat by a dense thicket of dwarfed pines and underbrush.

A pole had been imbedded in the center of this space, and to this pole the victims were bound side by side.

The outlaws, together with Velveteen George, Sam Slocum, and Estelle, were already there congregated, and the "Hangman's Brigade," including the irrepressible Jimmy the Twister, was quickly drawn up into line.

Estelle, herself, advanced with a couple of handkerchiefs to bandage the boys' eyes, but they proudly shook their heads.

"We can look death straight in the eye," said Mac, firmly. "We need no blindfolding."

"If Mac can stand it so can I," was Snooksy's noble rejoinder.

"All right then," cried Sear-Faced Pedro.

"One!"

The brigade cocked their muskets and raised them to the shoulder.

"Two!"

Six barrels pointed steadily at the boys' hearts.

"Fire!"

The command came not from the leader of the outlaws, but from the surrounding thickets; a volley of musketry followed, and every one of the Hangman's Brigade sank either dead or wounded to the ground.

The effect was paralyzing on the outlaws, and before they could recover from it, with many a shout and huzza a detachment of soldiers, one hundred men strong, rushed in upon them.

"At last, murderer, we are face to face!"

The words were addressed to Sam Slocum, and, turning, he confronted the mysterious burglar—William Raymond.

CHAPTER XXIII.

VICE DEFEATED.

THE struggle between the outlaws and the troops was short, quick and decisive.

Overpowered by superior numbers and arms, the ruffians were glad enough to surrender unconditionally as the only method of avoiding instant death.

Each soldier had been provided with a pair of handcuffs, and these were deftly slipped on the wrists of each desperado as quickly as he was secured.

Sear-faced Pedro was the only one who had preferred death to capture, and he had blown his brains out with his own pistol.

In the rear-guard of the soldiers came Bill Norton, Jack Thomson, Mary, and the others, and they confined their attentions to freeing Mac and Snooksy from the pole, a proceeding which took but a moment to perform.

The scene at this moment presented quite a tableau.

There, on the ground, lay the still bleeding bodies of the Hangman's Brigade; beside them was stretched the corpse of their leader.

At the pole were our friends convulsively hugging and embracing the rescued boys; grouped in the center were the captured outlaws, as also Estelle and Velveteen George, surrounded by a cordon of police; while in the foreground Sam Slocum and William Raymond still stood glaring at each other.

The latter sprang upon his enemy and bore him to the ground, then, pressing one knee upon his breast, he caught him by the throat, and cried:

"Confess, Sam Slocum, as once already you did to your confederate, that it was you who murdered your sister—my wife! confess, or by Heaven I'll strangle you as I would a dog!"

"I—I confess!" gasped the miserable man.

"You have heard him!" exclaimed Raymond, releasing his hold on him and arising. "Handcuff him; let me deal with him."

"Never!" cried the self-confessed murderer, suddenly springing to his feet. "You shall accompany me to the infernal regions."

He drew a long bowie-knife, and made a savage lunge at his brother-in-law, but the latter had divined the action, and nimbly avoided the thrust.

The wretched man, seeing himself foiled, turned the dagger's point towards his own breast, and sank a bleeding, dying man on the mass of the slain.

"Daddy."

It was Jimmy's voice; but faint and weak. He was not yet dead, but he had only a few minutes still to live.

Velveteen George heard the cry, and all his love for his son, that single virtue among his thousand vices, asserted itself in his bosom with full force.

"My child, my boy," exclaimed he, tears for the first time dashing from his eyes; "let me go to him, he is dying. Oh, let me catch his last breath."

The soldiers, recognizing and respecting his

grief, silently nodded their consent, and he rushed over to where the dying boy was lying.

Kneeling beside him, he raised his son's head in his hand-cuffed hands, and stooping, pressed a kiss on the cold clammy forehead.

"Jimmy," whispered he, tenderly; "look at me; don't you know me?"

The lad opened his eyes, and a faint smile crossed his features.

"Daddy," grasped he, feebly. "My goose's cooked; but I don't care. I'd just as lief die now as any other time. You won't forget me, daddy, will you?"

"Never," replied the convict, huskily, "I've only a short time to live, but I'll never forget you."

"Where is mammy?"

"Here. Estelle, won't you take leave of your dying child?"

"Bah! what's the use?" replied she, unfeelingly. "We'll follow him soon enough. You'll be with him in the grave within an hour."

"Within an hour?" exclaimed he.

"Yes," answered she, tauntingly. "The bullet has only forestalled the poison I gave him. And you also have got your dose of it. Fool! did you think that I would let you two live after you had served my purposes. It's all up now. We've lost the game, and the world will be rid of all three of us."

Words fail to depict the effect of these cruel words on Velvet George. Since he had awakened this morning he had felt somewhat sick and uneasy; a sense of approaching death oppressed him. Now everything was clear to his mind. He became deathly pale; but a wild, unnatural light flashed from his eyes. He heard not Jimmy's groan as the boy expired; he cast the dead body from him, and sprang to his feet.

"Hell hound!" cried he, making one leap, and springing upon her. "False, treacherous woman; poisoner, murderess! Thus—thus receive your merited doom!"

With wild, ungovernable fury, he threw her on the ground, and literally trampled her to death before the soldiers could interfere and drag him away.

It is not known whether the hour had come for the poison to produce its dread effect, or whether the excitement under which he labored hastened its action. At any rate, he became suddenly deadly faint, and sank, dying, into the arms of those who had torn him from his victim.

"Where is Little Mac?" gasped he.

"Here I am," exclaimed our hero, as, with Snooksy, he advanced toward the dying convict.

"Why, do not be afraid," whispered he, as he caught the boy's hand in his own. "I cannot harm you now. For months I have been on your track to kill you. That woman commissioned me to do so. She feared you, because you are the child of her late husband George Mowbray and Effie Raymond, and the true heir to all the wealth your father left."

"Is the mystery of my birth to be at last revealed?" exclaimed Mac.

"Yes," continued the convict, his voice growing feebler as his end approached, "in my breast you will find a package of papers. I can speak no more. They—will—explain all."

A violent paroxysm succeeded these words, and when the convulsions ceased, the wretched, sinful man was no more.

An intense silence succeeded, which was at length interrupted by Mr. Johnson, who formed one of the party.

"Come," said he, "this is no place for us. We will go into one of the huts and talk over these strange and startling events, while the soldiers will inter the dead and remove the prisoners."

This advice was followed; Bill Norton, however, took possession of the papers indicated by the convict before his death.

When they were all assembled in the room which had been the scene of the carousal of the previous night, these papers were read by Mr. Johnson, amid general silence and attention on the part of the rest. What they contained is already known to our readers.

When he had concluded, William Raymond stepped forward and said:

"The ways of Providence are truly inscrutable. Seventeen years ago I left my father and my sister and came here to seek my fortune. What happened to me since then you all know. Since the day I left home I heard nothing of those I left behind me until this minute. Mac, your mother was my sister, as sure as there's a heaven above us. I am your uncle!"

"My uncle!" cried Mac, in wonder.

"Yes; and I have still another surprise in store for you. Snooksy, your chum, your companion, is my own son William, and your cousin!"

"You are my father!" exclaimed Snooksy.

The two boys impulsively rushed into the man's outstretched arms, and he clasped them both to his breast.

There was no need to question the veracity of this declaration.

The subtle influence which is best expressed by the phrase "blood is thicker than water," had drawn the lads to each other from their first meeting, and the knowledge that they were cousins but cemented the firm friendship which already existed between them.

"This is a happy day for you all," said Mr. Johnson. "Mr. Raymond, I congratulate you on the fact that your innocence has been established, and you can once more face your fellow-men. Your son has been restored to you, and I can vouch for his integrity, uprightness, and singleness of purpose. As the nearest relative of his mother's brother, the man who has cheated the gallows by committing suicide, he will succeed to the large wealth left by Sam Slocum. Thus, a bright future awaits him and you. I congratulate you, Mac," continued he, addressing our hero, "on your prospects. You will be extremely wealthy, and will, no doubt, share your good fortune with those who have been as parents to you. I am the only sufferer, it seems, for I shall probably lose the best engineer and fireman that have ever run an engine on my road. I shall, however, feel consoled in the thought that in your new sphere, you will find ample opportunities to maintain the same high-spiritedness and daring which have thus far distinguished you. Mrs. Norton, and you, gentlemen, will do me the honor of accompanying me to my home, where we will celebrate these fortunate occurrences."

"Oh, Mr. Johnson," exclaimed Mary, who had for some time been trying to interrupt the president's flow of speech, "how can you talk of such things when the fate of my child, my Effie, is as yet undetermined?"

"Why, bless my soul," cried the old gentleman, quite taken aback, "I really forgot. Pardon me, Mrs. Norton, my enthusiasm led me away. But we shall find your daughter. My word of honor upon it. All California shall be searched."

"Is Effie gone?" exclaimed Mac, to whom all this was a revelation.

Bill briefly explained what had happened, and added:

"Let us return at once to San Francisco. Mr. Johnson will, I am sure, give temporary accommodations to my wife and servant, and then we will make up a party to scour the surrounding country, and not cease in our efforts until we find Effie and the maniac."

Mr. Johnson gave his immediate consent to this arrangement, and the party at once set out upon the return.

Mr. Raymond, not wishing to pass the plateau again, led them into the woods by a different route.

They walked through the thickets for some time, and then, when almost at the suburbs of the city, Mary suddenly cried out:

"Hark!"

All stopped and listened.

Low and indistinct, yet plainly recognizable, came the voice of a young girl singing.

"'Tis Effie," cried the mother, sinking on her knees. "Thank God, she lives and is near."

CHAPTER XXIV.

VIRTUE TRIUMPHANT.

THE song was one of those sweet, simple melodies, which Mrs. Norton had taught Effie in her childhood, and which Mac had often joined her in singing.

Tears came to the eyes of all as they listened to the plaintive, pathetic ballad, and for some moments after Mary's ejaculation the silence was unbroken.

Mr. Johnson was the first to give utterance to the thought which was in everybody's mind.

"If she continues singing," said he, "the notes will direct our footsteps to where she is."

"Then let us press forward at once," cried the mother, springing to her feet.

Some subtle influence must have told the sweet singer that her parents and friends were near, for the notes never ceased, but grew more distinct in tone and louder in volume as they penetrated the dense thicket lining the narrow footpath which they had been following.

The song led them to the decayed trunk of one of the giant trees in California—trees not to be found in this part of the world, and whose dimensions are oftentimes equal to those of a house.

The sound issued distinctly from within the tree.

"She must be inside that tree," said Bill.

"Heavens!" exclaimed his wife, "is it possible for people to exist there?"

"Nothing more possible," replied the president.

"I've heard of whole families housing within a single tree, and very comfortable quarters they had, I assure you. Why, a single horizontal section of one of these giants of the forest forms the

floor of a celebrated ball-room in San Francisco, and affords room enough for fifty couples to dance at once. There must be an entrance somewhere in the trunk."

Mac and Snooksy—the reader will pardon us for thus continuing to call the latter by the name most familiar to us—hastened ahead, and soon a shout from them told that the opening had been found.

It was as large as an ordinary door, and permitted the whole party to enter at once.

"Effie!"

"Mother!"

The young girl was clasped to the maternal breast, and while they are transfixed with the joy of reunion, we will give a hasty description of the appearance of the interior of this wonderful tree.

In size it was about as large as an ordinary room; the limbs and upper portion of the tree had partially rotted away, and partly been lopped off with an ax, thus the free air of Heaven, as also the wind, rain and storm could descend into the interior.

The sides were rudely fashioned by man's handiwork; and several benches and a table gave evidence of human habitation.

On the table lay pieces of dried and smoked meats, and a quantity of crackers, while beside them stood an earthen jar half filled with water.

The floor was covered to the depth of several inches by a soft bedding of dried leaves, and on this natural couch in the center of the apartment lay the maniac, apparently asleep.

"Oh, mother," exclaimed Effie, after mutual congratulations had passed between the parties, "I cannot tell you what agonies I have endured during the last two days. The last I remember was becoming unconscious in the burning cottage; when next I opened my eyes I was in this prison. There was another man here then, but he was dying. I could hear him tell the maniac that he was a hermit, and had been living here for forty years. With his dying breath he bequeathed this place and all it contained to my captor. When the hermit was dead the maniac carried his body into the woods, and returned before I could gather strength to run away. He told me that I was his Effie; that we should live here always, and that he would treat me kindly; but that if I called for help or tried to escape he would kill me."

"Poor child," murmured her mother.

"You can imagine the state of my feelings," continued the girl. "Thirst and hunger we do not suffer, for the hermit had provided himself with sufficient store; but the maniac never once left my side, and until this morning never even closed his eyes in sleep. Now, however, his long sleep terrifies me. I believe he will never wake again."

"And what induced you to sing our favorite songs?" asked Mac.

"The hope that you might be searching for me," replied she, while a rosy flush suffused her cheeks, "and hearing me sing might come to my rescue. I dared not otherwise attract attention, you know."

"Thank Heaven!" exclaimed Bill, "that we heard you. But this maniac must be secured and rendered impossible to do further harm."

They had all been gathered around the young girl while she was telling her story—that is, all save William Raymond.

He, at sight of the maniac, had given utterance to a half-stifled cry, and sunk on his knees beside the old man.

Now, when Bill and Jack make a movement as if approaching the sleeping lunatic, he raised his pale and tear-stained face, and exclaimed:

"Back, back; the man who touches him dies."

"Why?" asked Bill, surprised at this utterance.

"Because," replied Raymond, in a voice husky with emotion, "this man is my father."

"Your father!" cried all in astonishment.

"Hush," whispered he, as the maniac made a movement; "he is awaking."

They grouped themselves in silent awe around the lunatic, whose lamp of life was, indeed, about to be extinguished.

The old man's eyes unclosed, and their first glances rested on the features of his son.

He started visibly, and passed his trembling withered hand over his wrinkled brow as if to remove the impression of some hideous dream.

He looked again.

The gaze was not a maniac's wild stare, but one of tender love and sweet recognition.

His silent auditors saw, while a strange thrill passed through their frames, that a beneficent Providence had suffered reason once more to assume its sway in his mind, before forever shutting out the light of his existence.

"William," murmured the dying man brokenly, "my son, my first-born. Have I been dreaming? Has the past been but the baseless vision conjured up by sleep. Where is your sister, where is Effie?"

"She is in heaven, father," gently returned his son.

A look of profound disappointment passed over the old man's features, a deep sigh issued from his lips, while the hot tears chased one another down his furrowed cheeks.

"Dead!" cried he, somewhat excitedly, while his feeble frame shook and quivered as with the palsy; "dead! Then it is true what they told me. She left her father, her old, grief-stricken father, sorrowing for his absent son, and having only her to comfort and console him, she left him for a stranger's love, and when that stranger deceived and deserted her, she would not come back, she would not trust and confide in her poor old father, who would have laid down his life for her; she's dead—dead, dead, dead!"

He buried his face in his hands and wept aloud. The bystanders could not gaze unmoved at his grief, and for some moments the sound of sobs and tears alone broke the silence that reigned supreme.

"Father," murmured Raymond, gently, "it is true that she is dead, but her son lives."

"Her son!" agitatedly cried he, raising his head from his hands. "Oh, where is he? Let him be brought before me; let me bless him before I die."

"I am her son," chokingly exclaimed Mac, dropping on his knees beside the dying man.

He gazed at him earnestly for some moments, then leaning forward and pressing a kiss on the lad's forehead, he exclaimed:

"Yes, you are her son. In your features my

Effie lives again. I have seen you before. You are one of the phantoms of my dream; but the night has passed, it is daylight now. I bless you, my child. Your mother was good, was true. Others wronged her, but she was sinless, for she could not sin. She is an angel now, and you must always think of her as such. You will promise me this, my child?"

"I promise," replied Mac, with quivering lip.

"Then you will be forever blessed. William, I am fast passing away; earth is vanishing from my eyes, and I see a vision of glory before me."

Supported by his son, the dying man struggled to his feet.

His face was upturned towards the sky and his features transfixed by a calm and holy joy.

"I hear celestial music," gasped he, faintly; "it is growing louder and coming nearer; the gates of heaven are ajar, and an angel robed in white and wearing a crown of glory, extends her hand in welcome towards me."

His manner grew more excited and his voice grew louder and more firm.

"I see her face," cried he, in joyful tones. "I recognize her. At last I find her again. It is my child. Effie, Effie, I am coming."

His last words were fairly shrieked out; and before their echo had died away, his spirit had fled, and his son held but the cold, lifeless remains.

Reverently and tenderly they bore him to the city, and their affairs being quickly settled, the

next day found them *en route* to their former home.

A week later they laid him in the grave beside the daughter he had so loved, and simply added his name to the one inscribed on the tombstone, to mark his last resting-place.

The legal formalities to establish Mac in his rights and to prove the innocence of William Raymond were gone through as speedily as circumstances permitted it. The Boy Engineer was declared to be the rightful heir of the vast estate left behind by his father, James Mowbray, while his uncle, who was also appointed his guardian, took charge of the property of Sam Slocum, deceased, in trust for his son, William Raymond, Jr., otherwise known to us as Snooksy.

Both the latter and Mac are attending college, to perfect themselves for the profession of civil engineer.

Bill and Mary Norton, with Effie, reside in the Fifth avenue mansion, once the residence of the fashionable Mrs. Estelle Mowbray. Jack Thompson and his family often visit them, and when the boys are home on vacation, you may be sure that the house rings with merry shouts.

The further history of Mac is still behind the curtain of the future, for the events which we have depicted are but of recent date, but when that curtain comes to be lifted, it will be found that as a man he will have more than fulfilled the bright promises of his youth, and that the reward which ever attends true merit and patient endurance, will only add another laurel to those he has gained as the "Boy Engineer."

[THE END.]

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